Surely Some Star Binds Me To You

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/46844986.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	One Piece (Anime & Manga)
Relationships:	Monkey D. Luffy & Original Character(s), Mugiwara Kaizoku | Strawhat Pirates & Original Character(s), There's so much friendship, And it gets flirty but there will never be actual romance with the OC xoxo, Kaya/Usopp (One Piece), Nami/Nefertari Vivi, Portgas D. Ace & Original Character(s), Roronoa Zoro/Sanji, It's always lurking and stalking when you least expect it, any romantic ships up here are slowburn/a background focus
Characters:	Mugiwara Kaizoku | Strawhat Pirates, Original Characters, Original Non-Binary Character, Monkey D. Luffy, Roronoa Zoro, Nami (One Piece), Usopp (One Piece), Vinsmoke Sanji, all them bitches, Nefertari Vivi, Tony Tony Chopper, Portgas D. Ace, Nico Robin, Franky (One Piece), Brook (One Piece)
Additional Tags:	Self-Insert, Attempt at Humor, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff, Angst, Don't Worry It's Fine, LGBTQ Themes, Aromantic, Queerplatonic Relationships, How Do I Tag, Reincarnation, sorta - Freeform, Isekai, You Know What I'm Talking About, No beta we die like somebody who may or may not die in this fic, fuck around and find out, Detectives, Timeline Shenanigans, Friendship, Mugiwara no Ichimi | Straw Hat Pirates As Family, Hugs, clownery, the mature rating is because I swear A LOT, i'll add shit as i go, Canon-Typical Violence, Guns, oh I can't believe I forgot, One Piece Spoilers, all your faves are autistic, BTW, Aromantic Monkey D. Luffy, Panic Attacks, I just realized they happen enough that I should tag that lmao, It's kinda a time travel fix-it but you sure as fuck don't know what I'm fixing and neither do they, Original Akuma no Mi | Devil Fruit, Marriage?, Marriage, of the platonic variety, They're SOULMATES your honour, Platonic Kissing, I FORGOT TO ADD THAT LMAOOO, kissing the homies, Kiss 'em on the lips. Go ahead. Do it, Becoming a BAMF Through Osmosis; a twelve step guide on stealing your man's swag, step one: embrace codependency with open arms, step two: toss your self preservation out the damn window, Fighting Canon But Canon Has Hands, Somebody Lives/Not Everyone Dies, That Fuck Around and Find Out Tag Just Got Louder
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Every Star On An Ocean Somewhere
Collections:	Constellations of Our Own, Let's not forget our Humanity for a second, personal faves, eugenia's bookshelf, All my favs, Crow's collection of SIOC, always to be read over and again, ^0^, Take all my money and

	soul for these, Ridiculously Hilarious Fics, RaeLynn's Epic Rec List, One piece fics I think about all the time, Amazing stories, Fics That Make Me Go Feral, Across the Multiverse, Anime Fics I Can't Forget, We Scream Into The Void, fics engraved on my heart, jrmuffin's favorites, Long Fics to Binge, A Glimmering Hoard Of Shiny Fics, Whymsie's dearly beloved classics, One piece, One Piece works that have my soul, Amazing fics :D, honest to the gods just my favorite fics, What will you do with what you have learnt?, Stories that drive away the nihilism, Fics I will sell my Soul for, I Read This Instead of Sleeping, long fic to binge-read, Time to Find The One Piece
Stats:	Published: 2023-04-30 Completed: 2025-08-17 Words: 595,472 Chapters: 140/140

Surely Some Star Binds Me To You

by Aachria

Summary

I turn around, and slam my forehead into the deck as I fall to my knees. “Please, god, I know the last time we talked I told you to suck an egg but what the actual fuck. What did I do? Is this because of the gay thing? I’ll stop I swear I’ll knock it off just *please—”*

“What are you talking about? Why were you swimming all the way out here? What’s with your weird clothes?” The Boy, whom I refuse to name on principle, starts rapid fire shooting out questions while wiggling his way across the tiny boat to me.

“This is actually happening. Oh my god this is real, what the shit…” I turn around from my position on the floor to see The Boy crouched inches from my face. I give an undignified yelp and scramble as far back as I can without tipping over the edge.

He gives me that bright grin and announces “I’m Monkey D. Luffy! I’m gonna be King of the Pirates!” Then he cocks his head to the side. “Who’re you?”

Notes

Blacked out during my break at work and now this exists. Posting this because what's the point of just having it sit around and rotting in my Drive?

If there's spelling errors no there isn't. Just enjoy this shitshow and I'm sorry in advance that it's written in first person POV because ik some people hate that shit. It's also self indulgent as hell and the language I use is fucking ridiculous.

That's all I got. Please enjoy, and if you don't hate it then stick around.

Also blanket permission for making fanart, podfics, translations, your own fics based on this etc. Don't bind it to sell it obviously but you can bind a copy for yourself (once it's finished ofc don't start until we get there unless you're making multiple books), if you're gonna write your own fic based on this link it in the inspired section because I'd love to see it, and any translations and such should stay on AO3.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Chapter One: I'll Stay Right Here With You

Chapter Summary

Sun - Two Door Cinema Club

Did…

Did I just die in a Dominos parking lot?

Chapter Notes

I have literally never posted anything on AO3 despite using it for like... 4-5 years? So idk what the hell I'm doing. If you notice some weird shit up with like the text or something just let me know.

Car accidents and a bit of drowing (and death. Obv.) abound!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You know the worst part about this whole fucked up mess? It was a normal day. A normal ass day.

I woke up, middle of the afternoon, with drool all over my face not knowing what century I was in. I made myself mediocre instant ramen with the intent to sit around all day hating myself. Normal goddamn day.

A normal day where my stupid ass decided 'gee the weather sure is nice, maybe I'll go for a walk to the Dominos down the street for lonely dinner!' So I put on a pair of black cargo pants and a yellow flannel shirt I got from my dead grandpa (hey, if it works it works) grabbed my wallet, keys and phone and went on my merry way.

What a fucking joke. That accursed Dominos is, I shit you not, a three minute walk from my front door. It is a proverbial hop skip and a jump away. If you thought 'what the hell could go

wrong in less than three minutes?' Then you're the idiot god played for a fool. Yes I thought the same thing. Shut up.

Normal day. Normal day where I took my normal route through the parking lot of a shitty suburb plaza to get to the normal shitty kinda-not-even-that-good Dominos for a sad lonely 'congrats no one cares what you do' dinner.

Normal day where some stupid motherfucker in a red Honda civic who's insurance is about to go way through the roof goes speeding into a normal parking lot at decidedly *not* normal speeds to body slam normal me hard enough that I went fucking *flying*.

Normal me then smashed head first into the concrete and everything went black.

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Did…

Did I just die in a Dominos parking lot?

…

……

FUCK

Of all the ways to go? Really?? I know I've never been super stoked about being alive and sure, I've crossed the road a couple times without checking for cars, and *yes* , I have been more than a little reckless with my mortality in the past few years but *really?*

This sucks. I had plans this week. I had a book I wanted to finish, a YouTube video I wanted to watch, a show I wanted to binge, four new songs queued up in my playlist and that's just *it?*

And now I float towards the warm embrace of death. Fucken balls. Is this the part where I go to hell? Why does it feel… cold?

Better question, why does hell feel like drowning? I don't remember this part of Dante's Inferno. I actually don't remember any of Dante's Inferno so that's not surprising, but I honestly thought that going to hell would burn more?

Beyond the sting of what feels like salt on my eyelids and in my nose it mostly just feels like swimming in the ocean.

Wait, am I still supposed to hurt while I'm on my way to hell? Because I can feel a steady pressure building in my lungs and there's a dull ache in my everything.

I tentatively open my eyes and OH BOY IMMEDIATELY REGRET THAT SLAM THOSE FUCKERS SHUT THAT'S DEFINITELY SALT WATER MAYBE THIS REALLY IS HELL —

Wait, salt water?

I start thrashing violently, feeling my heavy limbs move sluggishly through the water I'm apparently submerged in. I'm trying desperately to kick to a surface that for all I know doesn't even exist, I grit my teeth and reopen my stinging eyes.

Above me I can see faint light, a surface just beyond my reach. I swim up as fast as my heavy clothing and tired limbs will let me.

Maybe I'm not actually dead and I just got slammed by that car hard enough that I fell into the pond? That's across a whole street? And definitely not this deep, who am I kidding I have

no idea what's going on—

I'm paddling and paddling, my lungs feel close to bursting and the light is getting brighter and brighter.

Aren't you supposed to go away *from the light at the end of the tunnel? Whatever.*

I can almost taste the fresh air and feel it on the tips of my fingers when a dark shape seems to pass over me. Big enough that it's at least twice my size and roughly an oval, it drifts right past my head and I finally break the surface.

That first breath of air almost felt heavenly. The first thing I notice is that it's goddamn bright up here, and 'up here' seems to be in the middle of a goddamn ocean.

"FUCKING HELL!" I yell amidst the splashing and heavy breathing. I'm not gonna last long just treading water in the middle of the ocean, I'll either get too tired to keep it up or the sun will cook me or I'll get eaten by something horrible—

Basically shit's not looking so good. I'm seconds away from bursting into hysterical tears over here.

"What're you doing?" a boy's voice asks me. I whip my head around and see what looks like a small dinghy, probably the shape that passed over my head. The boy has a messy head of black hair and is wearing a red vest thing, he's half hanging out of his shitty dinghy and is staring right at me.

"Drowning, can't you tell?! Help me up!" I gargle out while shimmying through the water to him. I grab onto the side of his boat and start trying to haul myself in. He grabs me around the waist and somehow uses his skinny little twig arms to swing me ass over teakettle onto the floor of his vessel.

“Good lord you’re stronger than you look. Where the hell am I?” I ask, looking around at the miles of water surrounding us on all sides.

“East Blue,” he answers, titling his head like a curious puppy.

I snort. “Cute, what hemisphere are we in?”

He makes a face. “Hammer-what? You’re weird.”

He bends down to grab something out of the bottom of the boat and shoves it on his head, a bright yellow straw hat with a red ribbon on it.

Ladies and gentlemen, it’s at this point I make that crucial connection. I look this weirdo up and down, take in the crescent scar under his eye, his frankly ridiculous getup, the shitty dinghy, and that damning straw hat.

I take a deep breath.

I turn around, and slam my forehead into the deck as I fall to my knees. “Please, god, I know the last time we talked I told you to suck an egg but *what the actual fuck.* What did I do? Is this because of the gay thing? I’ll stop I swear I’ll knock it off just *please—”*

“What are you talking about? Why were you swimming all the way out here? What’s with your weird clothes?” The Boy, whom I refuse to name on principle, starts rapid fire shooting out questions while wiggling his way across the tiny boat to me.

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I do the only thing I can do. I pass out.

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Unfortunately, I wake up. I wake up with an eyeful of the beautiful blue sky and think maybe, *just maybe,* I had a weird near-death dream after getting bodied by a car and I’m just on the ground in the parking lot.

“Are you awake now?”

Scratch that shit I’m still in hell. I groan and roll over onto my stomach, hands wrapped around my head like it’ll make The Boy (who should not be here *I should not be here—)* disappear.

“Please for the love of all that’s sacred and good, tell me you’re a hallucination,” I mumble through my hands

“Shishishi, nope!”

My god he’s got the laugh

“What’re you doing now?”

I pause half hanging off the boat to turn to look at him. “Hold for a minute please,” I say pleasantly.

Then I shove my head underwater and start screaming. A lot. With curse words. I come up for a breath at some point so I can keep screaming. Pretty cathartic, I'm not going to lie.

Once that is out of my system I pull myself back into the dinghy and turn to face The Boy with a smile. He's still staring at me with that blank dumb grin.

There's no thoughts behind those eyes, are there?

I take a deep breath. "Sorry, where were we? You're Monkey D. Luffy and you're gonna be King of the Pirates, right?"

His face lights up in this huge grin (*dammit he's got the smile)* and he starts laughing again. "Yup! Now who're you? And why were you swimming all the way out here?"

"Uuuuh…"

Shit shit shit I gotta come up with a name, something cool and not totally stupid—

"E. D. Domino."

FUCK THAT'S SO STUPID WHY DID I SAY THAT.

"You can just call me Ed."

Did I just accidentally give myself the D. initial? What is wrong with me? And DOMINO? REALLY??

"Cool! Why're you out here?"

Fuck, why *am* I out here?

“Dude I have no idea.”

He’s not gonna buy that.

“Fair enough!”

HE BOUGHT THAT. WHAT IS THIS GUY?

I take a quick look at the horizon. “So uh, where exactly are we? In relation to nearby islands I mean.”

Might as well commit to this shit, the hell else am I gonna do? I’ve got enough basic knowledge of this world outside the plot that I should be able to avoid painful death or fucking shit up too bad, right?

“We’re about a day away from Dawn Island uuuuh, that direction!” he tells me with a smile, pointing in what I’m certain is just a random ass direction.

I slowly nod. “Right. Cool. So, what's the future King of the Pirates doing in a dinghy? Isn’t that kinda… below your station?”

He just gives me this scandalized look. “I had to start with *something!* It’s better than just a barrel.”

That I cannot argue with. Wait, doesn't Coby find him in a barrel?

“It’s my dream! What’s yours?”

Fuck I forgot everything in this crazy place runs on dreams like Peter Pan’s fairy dust. “Let’s come back to that one.”

“Ok! What do you do?” he asks, bouncing on the spot.

I scratch my jaw with a squint. “In general or as a profession?”

He rolls his eyes like I’ve just said something dumb. “I *meeeean* what’s your thing? What do you do that’s cool?”

This motherfucker. “I mean I like to read? I know a shitload about all kinds of stuff in this world. I could tell you all about the Grand Line and the crap in it.”

His eyes light up like I just told him it was Christmas. “Really?! You know all about it just from reading?”

Technically true? “Yup. That and good old fashion detective work, sussing stuff out from rumours and such.”

He starts waving his hands around. “Waaa! So you’re a detective!” Meh, if it ain’t broke don’t fix it. Time to commit *hard.*

I puff out my chest and point at myself with my thumb. “Damn right I am! I’m a first class detective! As for my dream, it’s to solve the greatest mystery of this world, I’m gonna find out what the One Piece is!”

Is that aiming high enough? He likes wild dreamers right? Somehow his eyes start sparking even more.

Yeah I think I've won him over enough to hitch a ride to some random island and spend the rest of my days avoiding this shit in bliss.

"Join my crew!"

FUCK ABORT ABORT—

"I don't know about that one Chief," I say, sounding much calmer than I am.

He gets this sad kicked puppy pout on his face. "But why not? I'm gonna be King of the Pirates, so I'm gonna find the One Piece! That means we're going to the same place!"

Goddamnit this kid is charming. What nutjob rolled him a 20 in charisma, huh? Not fucking fair.

I gather my strength and the strength of my ancestors to turn this sweet sweet boy down when he turns the puppy dog eyes up to the max and damns me to hell with a "please?"

Goddamnit. Goddamnit goddamnit *goddamnit*—

"Ok." I'm going to die an excruciating death. And I am going to suffer massive amounts of pain. Because of this boys stupid fucking *puppy dog eyes.*

But…

But he flashes me a huge gummy smile and I feel something in me melt. "Yeah. Ok, sure." Maybe everything will just work out? Maybe his main character plot armour will rub off on me enough that I'll actually survive to see the One Piece—

Then he launches himself at me and sends both of us tumbling into the water in a tangle of limbs and indignant squawking.

“GODDAMNIT—”

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It takes every ounce of strength in my body and panicked recollections of my lifeguard friend’s half-assed lessons in ‘how not to drown with people’, but I manage to pull myself and the rubber boy wonder back into the dinghy.

He throws his head back and laughs, wet hair plastered to his face. “Wow! I really thought I was gonna die that time!”

I whip my head around to hiss at him like a wet angry cat. “It was your fault, *idiot!”*

He just giggles in response. Little shit. I pull off my worn and creased-to-high-hell combat boots and dump the excess water out of them over the side of the boat, all while maintaining eye contact with the entirely unapologetic boy.

“Do you have any kind of plan at all?” I ask him, knowing damn well he doesn’t.

“Not at all!” he says with an unworried grin.

I hate being right.

The sun is getting low in the horizon, to the point where the distant ocean is turning a vibrant orange. The water really does stretch out as far as the eye can see. I guess they never mention how… desolate sailing can be.

“Why’s your face doing that?”

I’m jolted back to the present by Luffy snapping his fingers in my ear. “Doing what?” I ask.

He makes a face, “this! It was getting all scrunchy like you were thinking too hard.”

Observant fucker… “Don’t worry about it, Captain.” The title seems to distract him from my temporary melancholy.

Fuck man, it’s just hitting me. I *died.* Probably. There’s not really a way for me to check per say… But I’m pretty sure that last crunch I heard was my skull, and I’d rather not get shoved back into my body to check.

It’s actually kind of sad how fast I’m adjusting to this. Getting isekai’d into an anime is something that happens in other anime and like, fanfiction or something. Not to actual people, and certainly not to me.

Oh god, what are they gonna do with my body? Is my mom gonna give me an open casket funeral? That would suck major ass. I don’t want people staring at my corpse.

Wait, do I *have* a corpse? Or did my body just like… disappear in a shower of sparkles?

Shit, my *mom.* Oh her kid just bit the big one. This is gonna suck for her. Now I feel terrible for not feeling terrible that I don’t have to watch that.

“You look like you’re gonna start crying,” Luffy pipes up again, now sitting close enough he could rest his head on my legs if he leaned forward.

“Not gonna cry,” I say, desperate to believe my own words.

“You can if you wanna, not like there’s anyone else out here to judge you.” This boy is smart and cunning and evil and—

And is watching me break down crying in the shitty boat he dragged me into.

Fine. Ten… Ten minutes. I’ll be sad and mourn for ten minutes. Then I stop.

It actually ends up being closer to half an hour of relentless crying, and by the end Luffy really has migrated to basically laying on my lap.

My eyes are puffy and have had enough salt water in them to last me months, but they are well and truly done crying.

“Are you done being sad now?” Luffy asks. The tone he uses implies that it would be fine if I was still being sad, it was just a genuine question.

I shove his hat down over his face. “Yeah, now let’s get you that crown.”

Then I take in the fact that it is very much evening and the temperature is very much dropping and I am very much still semi-damp. “Or we could huddle for warmth and get the One Piece… tomorrow. Or next week.”

He laughs, but just shoves himself into my side as I scooch further into the belly of the dinghy. I feel like it should feel weirder how fast this dude is getting touchy feely, but mostly I’m just appreciative of the contact.

“Yeah, tomorrow sounds good.”

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh here we go. I've got like ten chapters prewritten so consistent updates should happen every Saturday/Sunday for the time being. I work full time and write most of this on my breaks so if I ever need time to catch up on chapters hopefully the head start will give me lil bit of a cushion.

Hope you're in for the long haul fuckers, this is gonna take a while.

Also here's art of Ed that was redrawn for the 100 chapter anniversary (you'll find the original in chapter 10) but I figured might be good to have here in the beginning. Ignore the gun, it'll make sense in a few chapters lmao.

Chapter 2: Chapter Two: A Beam of Light Comes Shining Down On You

Chapter Summary

I Ran (So Far Away) - A Flock of Seagulls

Yeah. Uh — there's a whirlpool behind me. So that's good to know.

Chapter Notes

SURPRISE MIDDLE OF THE WEEK CHAPTER BITCHES!

Yeah I got sad so here. Two chapters a week probably won't be the standard, but we're just starting so I'm exited.

Also me getting the first validation from the internet for something I made ever? Slay.

Also I appreciate the comments sm but I'm about as good at replying to them as I am to text messages. Please know I see you and I love you I just don't know what to say T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"How old are you?"

"18."

"What's your favourite colour?"

"Yellow."

"Favourite fruit?"

"…Peaches?"

This has been going on for way too long.

I have been in this absolute shitshow of a universe for maybe… 10 hours? 8 hours of which was spent unconscious. He's been non-stop asking me icebreaker questions like the beginning of some partner project. I've just been throwing out answers while trying to remember what the hell is supposed to set us off onto adventure.

Can't remember if it's a small hurricane or a whirlpool… Isn't he supposed to get his shit rocked immediately after leaving Dawn Island?

"What's with your weird haircut? And why is only part of it green?"

"It's called a mullet. And it's not weird! You sound like my mother. You know she had the same damn haircut when she was my age? And it's only part green because I dyed it a few months ago and haven't had the time to touch it up."

"What's that thing you're screwing with?"

"It's called a phone, it's like a Transponder Snail but better. Only mine doesn't work anymore."

And probably never would again. After my unwanted swim in the ocean my precious baby is nothing more than a brick of glass and metal. Rest well sweet prince.

I tuck the poor sucker into one of my pants glorious pockets and continue to take stock of what I have. Besides my wallet, full of money that would probably be virtually useless in this world, I just have a stick of gum I forgot I had and my keyring, complete with the shitty pen knife I'm currently fiddling with.

I look up at Luffy while he pokes at my keys. “Anyways, you got a family?”

He makes a thinking face before brightening up. “Yup! I have Gramps and I guess Makino and Dadan, and my big brother Ace!”

My face slides into a smile. “Big brother huh? He a Monkey D. too, or is he a more pick-your-own brand of family?”

I already knew the answer to most of the things I had asked him, but making sure I had a reason to know some of the shit I knew wouldn’t hurt.

Luffy’s entire face brightens up further. “We’re not blood brothers, we swore it on some sake! So he’s my brother in all the ways that matter. He’s no Monkey D. though, his name’s Portgas D. Ace!”

I feign a look of surprise. “Portgas D. Ace? Like Fire Fist Ace, Second Division Commander of the Whitebeard Pirates?”

Luffy looks a little confused for a second but just grins wildly. “Yeah that’s him! What’s a Whitebeard?”

God this kid is so cute and so stupid.

I idly pick at my nails. “Whitebeard is an Emperor from the New World. That’s the second half of the Grand Line.”

Luffy flops back into the dinghy. “Waaa, it’s got two halves? How many Emperors are there? Is he super strong?”

This dumb boy is incapable of asking things one at a time, isn’t he?

“Yup, two halves. There’s four Emperors, and yeah they’re all hella strong. You’re gonna have to train for a long time if you wanna fight ‘em.” Please god if I’ve just accidentally set this idiot on the warpath to the Emperors early I’m going to boil myself alive—

“Ok! I’ll just wait to fight them later then!” he smiles.

I genuinely can’t tell if that was a bullet dodged.

I give him a look full of trepidation. “Any other famous family I gotta worry about?”

He scratches his chin, looking off the side of the boat. “I *thiiiink* my gramps is a big deal in the Marines?”

I stare him down. “How big a deal exactly?”

He just shrugs while I massage my temples. “Please tell me when you say gramps you aren’t referring to Monkey D. *Garp.* As in Garp the Fist, Hero of the Marines.”

He just flashes me a smile. “Yup that’s him!”

I just mumble under my breath, “No fucking wonder you’re crazy, with genes like that.” And that’s only the half of it!

He juts out his lip at me. “So do *you* have a family then?”

I make a face. “Yeah, I’ve got my mom who I mentioned earlier. My dad and her are divorced so I, uh don’t see him as much. I also have an older sister but um… we don’t talk much.”

Please don't pry into that one right now, use that emotional intelligence you obviously have —

"Cool! What's your favourite type of meat?"

Back to square one.

I massage my temple. "Crab. Hey Luffy, I don't suppose you've seen any crazy weather yet, have you? Like big twisters, a freak hurricane, or like a whirlpool?"

"Like the one over there?" he asks, pointing past my head.

Yeah. Uh — there's a whirlpool behind me. So that's good to know.

"Huh. Yeah like that." I turn back around to my silly companion and *lunge.* "LUFFY WHY DIDN'T YOU *TELL ME?"* I scream, trying to squeeze the life out of his scrawny rubber neck.

"Thought you knew!" he chokes out, seeming completely unbothered by the violence.

Ok, how the fuck am I gonna get outta this one? You can't cram that many monkeys in a barrel, and only one of us has the genes for it anyways. Regardless there's only one barrel in the boat, so do I just… swim and hope for the best?

"Ok, get in!"

"What?" I turn to look at the fool and see that he's dumped all of the barrels contents across the floor of the shitty dinghy and is gesturing for me to enter the thing.

I give him a flat and desperate look. “Luffy, hon, we’re not both gonna fit in that.”

He just shakes his head at me like I said something stupid again. “Yeah we are! I’m rubber so I’ll just like… bend or something!”

I hate that that makes sense .

“Fuck it, this or die.” So I cram myself into the barrel. Top ten things I never thought I’d be doing this week.

So I’m curled up in a barrel. I will be the first to admit that I am a lanky motherfucker that’s mostly legs, so this isn’t exactly what I’d call comfortable. And I’m not even claustrophobic! I like tight spaces! Luffy doesn’t seem to give a single shit about any of that though.

He shoves himself into the barrel right along with me, slamming down the lid behind him. Heedless of the elbows and knees shoved into my gut and armpit I try to catch Luffy’s eye in the darkness of our shared space.

“Hey Luffy?” He makes a questioning noise. “If we’re stuck in here for a long time, please don’t eat my corpse. I think you can get salmonella from eating raw meat, and I don’t wanna be your first foray into cannibalism.”

His dumb laugh sounds like a gun discharging in the tiny space. “You’re so dumb! I’m not gonna eat you, stupid. As your Captain I promise!”

“Yeah of course, the Captain of the barrel we’re stuck in. How could I forget,” I respond drily.

“You forgot?! Did you swallow too much water when you were drowning or something?”

“Luffy.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

“But—”

Then the rocking starts. And by rocking I mean the violent thrashing that sends our tiny vessel spinning through what I can only assume is the epicentre of the goddamn whirlpool we are stuck in.

I’d like to say I took it like a champ, maybe laughed in the face of the danger before us. I’d be lying. There was a fair bit of screaming coming from that tiny barrel, and none of it came from the future King of the Pirates.

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I couldn’t tell you how long it took for the freak weather to stop. I also couldn’t tell you how long we drifted around in that stupid goddamn barrel. Mostly on the grounds that I was A) incredibly nauseous, and B) basically blind with nothing to ground me but Luffy’s dumb rubber arms and legs wrapped around my torso.

I can tell you I finally noticed when we were no longer rolling around in the waves when Luffy suddenly, without warning, flung the top off our ‘ship’ yelling about food or naps or something.

I lunge immediately out of the barrel taking in gulps of fresh air. “FREEDOM!” I holler into the ceiling. I spend a good solid minute reacquainting myself with the concept of light.

After that I take in the scene around me, mostly the pink haired boy staring at Luffy with something akin to horror or awe, maybe a healthy mix of both.

“Good lord, how long were we in there?”

“Too long! I’m hungry!”

Then some random assholes start yelling at us and Luffy starts yelling back, there’s brief fighting but I don’t even bother listening. I just keep my eyes on Coby as he starts freaking out.

Then Luffy’s crazy ass grabs me by the back of my shirt and starts tumbling through the halls of the ship, with Coby chasing after us. “Where the hell are we going?” I mutter, trying to get my feet under me and failing.

“Food!” Luffy responds with a grin. He, using what I can only assume is his food-only GPS, guides us to a tiny storeroom where he immediately starts pigging out.

“How the fuck did you — Actually nevermind.”

I quickly snatch up an apple or two before he can demolish them all. Coby is still panicking up by the door. “Um… Sorry, it was Luffy? And I didn’t catch your friend's name…”

“E. D. Domino. Just call me Ed,” I say through mouthfuls of apple. Why the hell was I sticking with this dumbass name you may ask? Simple. I’m quite stupid and I like to stick to my guns.

Luffy laughs, trying to fit as much fruit in his mouth at once as he can. “Yeah! I’m the Captain and this is my First Mate!”

Hold the fucken phone ***WHAT*** .

“WHAT?!” I whip my head around to stare at Luffy, who seems completely oblivious to the insane shit that just came out of his mouth.

“What?” he asks around a mouthful of apple.

I frantically wave my hands. “Nope. No. Pick someone else! The First Mate is supposed to be almost as strong as the Captain, and I’m weak shit. You gotta choose like… a swordsman or something, c’mon!”

He immediately shakes his head and gives me the ‘you’re dumb’ look again. I’m seriously starting to get sick of it. “I don’t want a swordsman as my First Mate. I choose you, dummy. I’m the Captain and I get to decide!”

It hasn’t even been 24 hours, how have I fucked this up so much already? Dear god, how do I fix this…

I think Luffy and Coby continue to chat in the background but I’m more focused on the maelstrom swirling through my head. I have to make Luffy realize he’s being more stupid than usual.

Zoro is supposed to be First Mate of the Strawhat Pirates! Zoro, who they’re going to meet next. Zoro, the cool strong awesome swordsman who is *much* better at his job than some scrawny idiot who’s only combat experience comes from accidentally socking their friends in the face by gesticulating too vigorously when talking!

I zone back in when I hear Coby start yelling about his dream. “You really wanna be a Marine?” I ask, taking another apple.

“Yeah!” he shouts back immediately, before clocking that it was me who asked this time and gets an embarrassed look on his face. “Uh — I mean, yeah. You probably think that’s pretty stupid though, huh?”

I shake my head and take a bite of my fruit. “Nah. S’not stupid. But it will be hard to be the kind of Marine you’re talking about. It’s a system that is, at its core, corrupt and rotten. But if you think you can do it, fucken go for it.”

Coby’s face makes a fun transition through white to green to red before he seems to settle in a determined expression. “I’ll be a great Marine! I’ll help people and take down bad guys! One day I’ll even capture Alvida—”

Then the damn wall collapses. I’m probably gonna have to get good at pulling off dramatic entrances like this, huh?

“What was that you brat? You’ll capture *me?”* a gravelly voice calls. Good lord that woman is… Oh there’s no nice way of putting this. Rotund. She looks over Luffy and I and muses, “guess you’re not the Pirate Hunter Zoro, then. Coby! Who is the most beautiful woman on the seas?”

Talk about a confidence problem, needing little weirdos like Coby to give her self worth. “Who’s the fat lady?” Luffy blurts. Fuck, I forgot he has no tact!

As Alvida starts losing her shit, Luffy grabs onto both me and Coby and vaults the three of us out of the hole in the cabin onto the deck.

I’m getting surprisingly used to being hauled around like a suitcase. It’s actually kinda fun.

Luffy starts beating the actual shit out of the pirates on deck while me and Coby just kinda… cower off to the side. People are going flying and a stray sword almost impales me and Pinkie Pie’s malformed offspring.

“Watch where you’re throwing those things!” I yell, immediately shrinking back under the pirates' intense stares.

Isn't Nami supposed to be on this ship somewhere, stealing something?

Honestly, it's one thing to read or watch Luffy's batshit powers when it's fiction. But watching this boy bend and stretch in unnatural ways is… pretty disconcerting. "What… are you?" I hear Coby mumble beside me.

"I'm a rubber man!" Luffy hollers, cracking his fist into some poor schmuck who got just a little too close.

"A Devil Fruit then?"

Christ on a cracker, for a large woman Alvida sure is sneaky. With a pair of pathetic squeaks me and Coby both scramble across the deck to hide behind Luffy. Hey, he's my Captain. I'm allowed to do this shit!

He straightens up in front of us and puts his hands on his hips. "Yup!"

She narrows her eyes. "Hm. How interesting. You a bounty hunter then?"

Luffy just laughs. "I'm a pirate!"

Alvida finds that funny, going by her amused smirk. "All by yourself?"

Luffy turns just enough to reveal me still hiding behind him. "Shishishi, nope! Me and my First Mate! We'll get the rest later. Like… ten more guys. Yeah."

Don't drag me into this you lunatic!

Coby seems to agree, since he starts begging Luffy to leave before pausing. “No… you’re the ugliest thing on the sea!”

Oh boy maybe she *does* need people calling her pretty all the time, if that’s how people talk to her.

For the record, I don’t support body shaming or fatphobia in any way. Which is why what I’m about to say is entirely in reference to her personality. “YEAH, FUCK OFF YOU UGLY BITCH!”

Well if our goal was to piss her off it sure fucken worked. She takes a wild swing at us with her iron mace which Luffy takes TO THE HEAD. “Nice try, but I’m rubber!”

Luffy rears his arm back far beyond what should be natural for any kind of anything, rubber or not, and sucker punches Alvida so hard she rockets off the side of the ship

“Hot damn,” I whistle.

Luffy reels his arm back in and gives us a grin before turning to the pirates. “Hey! Get Coby a ship ready! He’s gotta go become a Marine!”

The lingering pirates immediately start scrambling to do just that. Then, as if invoking their name drew them right to us, the Marines themselves appear. And as always, they show up to ruin the fucking day.

Cannon fire splashes into the surrounding water and I turn to Coby. “If we just chuck you onto the ship maybe they’ll make you a cabin boy,” I suggest.

His eyes bug out of his head. “Are you crazy?! They’ll just capture me like I’m a pirate if I drop in like that!”

I shrug and make a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “It’s that or we drop you off in a basket on the steps of Marineford—”

“Here we go!”

“Wait what—”

Luffy bodily hauls the two of us over the side of the ship onto another goddamn dinghy, and as we splash onto the ocean my eyes catch on a head of orange hair and a pair of bewildered brown eyes.

Oh. There she is.

Before I can even call out to her, though I wouldn’t, we’re shooting off in the shitty boat away from the Marines as fast as it can carry us.

———

“That getaway should *not* have worked.”

But it did.

“Shishishi, that was awesome!”

Of course Luffy thought so.

Coby still looks incredibly shaken. “So… you two are going to the Grand Line then?”

Luffy throws his head back and laughs. “Yup! That's why I need a super strong crew, plus my detective!” I’m so glad he needed to specify that I wasn’t part of the ‘strong’ requirement. “You mentioned some Pirate Hunter, what’s he like?”

Coby raises an eyebrow. “Zoro? Last I heard he was detained in a Marine base…”

Luffy sighs, disappointed. “So he’s weak then?”

Coby immediately rushes to his defence and says some crazy shit about him, ranging from being a cold blooded killer to being a monster in disguise. This kid has one hell of an imagination…“Why do you ask?” he finishes.

Luffy just smiles. “Figured I might as well ask him to join my crew!”

Oh thank god, my saviour is abound! I start clapping. “Yes! Great idea! Sounds like the kind of guy you should make your First Mate!” I say enthusiastically.

Luffy gives me another of his ‘you’re stupid’ looks again. “Don’t need him for that, but a Pirate Hunter sounds neat!”

Coby starts to very vocally protest everything about that plan. “Please reconsider! He’s like a demon! But worse because he’s *real!” Wow* his voice gets shrill.

I shrug. “If you want my opinion, I don’t think the guy actually sees himself as a bounty hunter. Seems like the type to just beat up people wherever he goes and somehow always ends up collecting the bounties.”

Coby grips at his hair, face going purple. “That doesn’t make it much better! He’s a murderer!”

I level a blank look at Coby. “Dude, we’re pirates. Murder is in the job description.”

Oh wait fuck that’s true, am I gonna have to murder people? I don’t think I’m ready for that moral head fuckery. Huh, Coby looks seconds away from hyperventilating. I should probably try to diffuse that.

…

Nah.

“To Shell Town then?”

“To Shell Town!”

“ *No!”*

Chapter End Notes

And there we go! My impatient ass went 'if have chapters... why not post chapters???' and then I did. My strategy of always looking like an underachiever is failing already.

In totally unrelated news, I've gotta wear these rubber slip ons with steel toes at work because safety reasons, and now when I walk I sound like a clown. Like imagine you're just working and in the distance you hear an ominous *squeak squeak squeak* as I approach. Horrifying.

Chapter 3: Chapter Three: Things Have Changed For Me

Chapter Summary

That Green Gentleman (Things Have Changed) - Panic! At The Disco

“Hey,” the man’s voice calls out to us from across the yard, “get lost. You’re being an eyesore.” And there he is. Crucified on a post, my saviour. If I call this a Jesus cosplay am I going to go to actual hell this time?

Chapter Notes

Listening to Panic! At The Disco in the year of our lord 2023? Unfortunate yes.

It's Zoro time baybye! I never know what to put in the notes, but I feel like I gotta say something. Also the amount of serotonin I get whenever someone comments on this?? Unfathomable????

Remember homies, gun violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Coby’s sailing ability makes up for something that just me and Luffy had been sorely lacking. Sailing ability. I’m being very truthful when I say I’ve only even been on boats maybe five times in my life. Former life. Unlife? Whatever.

On precisely none of those trips was I in charge of rowing, steering, navigating, or had any kind of responsibility whatsoever. The closest I’ve gotten is kayaking, and I was very bad at that.

Apparently whatever the fuck me and Luffy were doing before was a ‘mockery of boatmanship’ and ‘entirely unbecoming of pirates’ but I much prefer the term Fucking Around and Finding Out.

So yeah, Coby in all his nautical glory managed to steer our happy asses to Shell Town with minimal issues.

I place a solemn hand on Coby's shoulder. "Yaknow what Coby, even if you never become some hero of the Marines, you'll always be a hero to me."

He just levels a blank stare at me. "Was that actual sarcasm or is your tone just naturally that dry?"

That has no good response so I just hop out of our dinghy and start making my way onto the dock, looking over my shoulder to stare at Luffy, "Food?" I prompt. He hoops and hollers as he scrambles after me.

It only takes Luffy 30 seconds to get fed up with my pace before he latches onto my arm and starts tugging me in a direction I'm sure his food-homing-radar has picked something up on. Coby and Luffy are chatting while I take in the scenery around us.

"Hey is that guy Zoro around here?"

I'm forced back to reality (or whatever this bullshit is) by all of the people around us jumping back and cowering at the mention of the swordsman.

"Maybe avoid mentioning him around here…" Coby murmurs as we keep walking.

Luffy shrugs, grabbing my hand to drag me as I get distracted by some shiny looking trinkets. "Let's go to the Marine base then!"

"From what I've heard the man in charge around here is named Captain Morgan—" Once again the townspeople around us recoil in fear. Wow, I knew this guy was an asshole but to invoke such a visceral reaction…

"Haha, this place is super weird!" Luffy laughs as we reach the imposing gates of the Marine base. Luffy's crazy ass immediately climbs up the wall shouting, "hey there he is!"

Coby starts freaking out while I try to join Luffy up on the wall, only struggling a little bit. Sue me, I can't climb walls.

"We could totally untie that guy."

Even when I agree with him he sounds like a lunatic!

"No way! He would probably just kill us!" Coby shrieks.

Luffy just smiles. "Nah, I'm super strong," he says nonchalantly. If nothing else he's got the confidence…

"Hey," the man's voice calls out to us from across the yard, "get lost. You're being an eyesore." And there he is. Crucified on a post, my saviour. If I call this a Jesus cosplay am I going to go to actual hell this time?

Coby falls from the wall in sheer shock, but I just look over his pose and muse, "that cannot be comfortable on the legs," which gets a laugh out of Luffy, so I consider it a win even though the glare Zoro is sending our way intensifies significantly.

Then a ladder slams onto the wall beside our heads. A small girl climbs up it, shushing us on her way, and scuttles across the yard to Zoro's tied up body.

Coby is still freaking out from where he's scrambled back beside us, but me and Luffy are just staring at Zoro and this little girl's interaction.

He's shooting down all her attempts to offer him the rice balls she's made but I can almost see in his eyes just how much he wants the damn things. He's been up there for like what, three weeks? Fucker must be *hungry.*

Then Captain Morgan's stupid crouton of a son comes sauntering onto the scene with a cocky grin and a call of, "what do you think you're doing in here?"

To be fair, I think Helmeppo is pretty cool after Garp gets his hands on him and beats him into shape. But right now good *god* do I want to sock him in the face.

His mean ass rolls up and snatches a rice ball out of the little girl's hand with a, "don't mind if I do!"

Honestly watching his face screw up as he realizes they were made with sugar instead of salt is almost worth listening to his posturing. He starts screaming and stomping the rice balls into the ground.

"Guess you didn't see the notice! Anyone caught helping a criminal will be executed, signed Marine Captain Morgan! Seems even little girls fear my dad," he says snootily after he finishes hacking.

"He's… Captain Morgan's son?" Coby mumbles from beside me.

"What a dick," I grunt. Helmeppo then proves my point by ordering his man to toss the little girl over the wall, which he reluctantly does.

As her body goes flying past us, Luffy jumps up and snatches her out of the air, safely delivering her to the ground. While Coby's fussing over her, Luffy starts making his way over the wall with me on his heels.

The Marines and Helmeppo have vacated by the time we amble across the yard.

"I hear you're a bad guy."

Roronoa Zoro, still crucified on a post, looks up at Monkey D. Luffy. “You’re still here?” he huffs.

They exchange a few words but I’m just looking the man up and down.

“He probably won’t keep his word, you know.” His sharp eyes dart over to me and I can’t help the involuntary shiver that runs down my spine. Good lord this guy is intense. “You’re still here ‘cause you’re a man of honour. He isn’t.” Zoro scoffs but doesn’t say anything in response. I scrunch my nose. “Ok, if that’s how you’re gonna be.”

I tug Luffy’s arm to prompt us into walking away, but Zoro interrupts. “Wait! Before you leave,” we turn back to him, “…can you pick that up for me?”

I gaze down at the ruined disgusting rice ball as Luffy scoops it up in his hands. “It’s mostly mud, you sure?” Luffy asks, making a face at the muck. Wow, finally found something *Luffy* won’t eat.

“Yes! Now hand it over!” he barks back, mouth wide for the rice. Luffy just shrugs and shoves it in. We listen to him hack and cough through the sugary mess before he finally seems to settle. “It was good. Thanks for the food.”

I just smile. “I’m sure she’ll appreciate that. See you later, Roronoa Zoro.”

With that, we cross the yard again and use the rope the girl left behind to climb back over the wall. And by that I mean Luffy climbs over it and I struggle much more than is strictly necessary before Luffy gets fed up and swings me over himself.

I can almost hear the smirk on Zoro’s face from behind us but hey, I never claimed to be smooth or athletic.

_____

Following the girl, Rika, as she introduces herself, we eventually arrive at the exterior of a restaurant. We slump down on its stoop and listen to her weave a tale about brave Pirate Hunter Zoro saving her from a rabid goddamn wolf Helmeppo's psycho ass kept as a pet.

I nod seriously. "Yup, seems like a nice guy. First Mate material for sure." Everyone shoots me looks of various levels of disbelief and I just shrug.

Then we hear Helmeppo's shrill annoying voice come screeching out of the restaurant. When we peek our heads in he's harassing the waitstaff and making a general nuisance of himself. The woman serving his table is slowly approaching, shaking hands clutched around a bottle of wine.

I put a hand on Luffy's shoulder and pass to intercept the woman. I put my hand over hers on the bottle and shake my head, before turning to Helmeppo and his assortment of Marine pals.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," I announce. The table goes quiet for a second as my request hangs in the air.

"Hah?" The smarmy little prick smirks up at me. "Do you any idea who my father is—"

"The right to refuse service," I interrupt him. He looks almost shocked I was willing to cut him off. "It's a *labour law.* I figured as a Marines' brat you'd know that, but are you going to need me to spell it out for you?"

His face turns an interesting shade of purple as he jumps up from his seat and spits out, "who the hell are you?!"

I just dip in a dramatic bow and smirk at him. "E. D. Domino, detective. At the people's service."

I'd like it on record that I have no idea what I am doing.

Honestly I could give less of a shit about this restaurant or the people here, but disrespecting service workers just really *eats* at me, yaknow? And if nothing else I have Luffy to punch this asshole in the face if he gets too uppity with me.

And honestly, who can fault me if I have a flair for the theatrical? I'm in another fucking universe right now! I get to indulge a little, right?

"Now you wily onion headed son of a bitch, are you going to leave or am I gonna have to ask again?"

This will be the first of many moments I wish I had a camera in this world, the indignant look on his face… perfection.

"You wanna end up like Roronoa Zoro?! Huh?! I'm gonna execute him tomorrow and make an example out of him for you!" The smug look he adopts gets almost immediately punched off as Luffy comes in with a wild swing.

"I've decided!" he announces as Coby tries to hold him back from Helmeppo's prone and howling form. "I'm gonna ask Zoro to join my crew!"

And then he'll become First Mate and I'll be off Scot free!

"And I'm not gonna make him my First Mate!"

Goddamnit.

_____

“I’m gonna go talk to Zoro now!” Luffy calls to me and Coby as he jaunts off.

“Fucking — Luffy! Wait up!” I turn to Coby and his alarmed face, “I’ll go get him, gimme a minute,” then start jogging after his goofy ass.

I finally manage to catch up to him as he’s climbing over the Marine base walls. “Running off without me to talk to weird swordsmen, what’s wrong with you? Take me with you when you’re gonna do fun stuff,” I bitch as we walk across the yard.

Luffy gives a sunny smile and bumps his shoulder into mine. “Shishishi, sure if that’s what you want!”

Zoro doesn’t seem to notice our approach, deep in thought, until we’re right in front of him. His eyes shoot open and latch onto Luffy, entire body tensing before he recognizes us and sags back down. “You again? Do you have nothing better to do?” he asks tiredly.

I shake my head. “Nope.”

Luffy turns up his nose. “I’ll untie you, but only if you promise to join my pirate crew!”

I am fucking amazed this approach worked on so many people.

“Hah? No way! I’m not a damn criminal!” Zoro spits out incredulously.

Eventually.

“C’mon! What’s wrong with pirates? You’re already known as a vicious bounty hunter,” Luffy whines.

Zoro glowers at us. “People can say whatever they want. I’ve never done anything I regret. I’ll make it through this challenge, then accomplish what I want.”

Luffy hums. “Mmm, I don’t care. I’ve already decided you’re gonna join me!”

Zoro’s eyes bug out of his head, then he turns to me with this look of ‘what the hell’ plastered across his face. I give him a commiserating smile. “Yeah, he’s always like this.”

Luffy just gives a proud smile and nods his head. “I heard you’re pretty good with swords, s’that true?” he asks.

Zoro glances between us. “Yeah, but that son of a bitch took my stuff.”

Luffy appears to think for a second. “Ok! I’ll go get it for you! So if you want it back you gotta join my crew! Shishishi!”

Zoro makes some truly wonderful squawking noises and protests as Luffy runs off giggling to the base.

Zoro turns to me with the most bewildered expression. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

I just shake my head and deadpan, “I’ve got no clue. I’m gonna try to untie you now.” While I start tugging at the ropes and looking for loose knots I can feel Zoro scrutinizing me. “Dude, I know I’m super hot but if you wanna keep staring I’m gonna start charging you,” I snark.

Zoro sputters. “No! You damn weirdo! You know they’ll kill you for this? Besides I only have ten days of this shit left.”

I snort. “Yeah right, they were gonna kill you tomorrow.” His eyes widen and I give him a disappointed look. “Oh don’t act so surprised. I told you he wasn’t a man of honour.” Zoro

stays quiet as I step back from the stupidly well tied ropes to dig my pen knife out of my pockets. Then there's a loud crash from the other side of the Marine base. I pause for a second then shrug. “That was probably Luffy.”

Coby comes running across the yard at that point. “Ed! I came to help!”

I sigh, flipping my knife open. “Oh wonderful, you get his arms. I’m gonna try to saw through this shit.”

“Seriously, just leave!” Zoro yells again. I roll my eyes and keep trying to cut the rope with my tiny ass three inch blade.

“They would have killed you anyways! When Luffy heard he punched Helmeppo in the face. These Marines… they really are honourless!” Coby glares at the ropes he’s trying to untie. “They’re after him now. He’s trying to save you, so I hope you’ll help him.”

Zoro stays silent.

“End of the line! For the crime of treason against me, I sentence you to death!” the voice of Captain Morgan calls from across the yard. We all turn to look.

Haha. Fuck. I’m starting to think me and Coby should get our ears checked, if huge groups of people can keep sneaking up on us like this.

That’s a lot of guns pointed at us. Morgan is ranting about some self important shit or other but I just turn back to the ropes with another roll of my eyes and keep hacking at them with my annoyingly dull knife. “This is fucking ridiculous,” I mutter under my breath.

“Fire!” I hear yelling behind me, and turn to see Luffy land in front of us and catch all the bullets in his body before shooting them out.

“What the hell are you?” Zoro breathes out.

Luffy just turns and grins. “I’m Monkey D. Luffy, and I’m gonna be King of the Pirates!”

Zoro keeps sputtering. “King of the — are you goddamn crazy?”

I just laugh. “He is. But he’s also dead serious, and he can do it too.”

Luffy throws his head back and laughs. “Damn right! Thanks, First Mate!”

I turn to glare at the rubber idiot. “No! Pick someone else dumbass!” Luffy rolls his eyes at me and Zoro makes a confused noise.

Luffy shoves the three swords he carried down in Zoro’s face. “I got you what I promised! I didn’t know which was yours so I grabbed ‘em all!”

Zoro cranes his neck back to avoid a scabbard to the nose. “They’re all mine, I use three sword style.”

Luffy’s smile widens. “Hm, well if you fight now, you’re gonna become a criminal. So it’s either that or die here execution style!”

Zoro huffs. “Whose son are you, the devils? Fine. If it’s die here or become a pirate, I’ll join you.”

Luffy starts whooping and cheering. “That’s great Luffy, now help me with these piece of shit ropes!” I grit out as I switch to the tiny scissors in the penknife.

“The hell is taking you so long?” Zoro complains.

I glare up at him. “This knife is very dull and the scissors are very small! Stop yelling at me, ingrate!” Zoro growls at me, honest to god growls. “I don’t have to take this from someone crucified like the second coming of Christ—”

“I think I made the knots tighter?” Luffy sheepishly laughs from my left. Both me and Zoro turn to glare at him.

The Marines start charging towards us with swords out and Zoro yells, “just give me a damn sword!” Coby is screaming and I’m angrily shutting my knife.

Luffy tosses all three swords at Zoro’s face. Faster than I can follow, all the ropes slash to pieces and a clang sounds as Zoro blocks every attack.

Holy shit that was cool.

Zoro holds the Marines in a stalemate. “I’m officially a criminal with this. So I’ll be a pirate, that I promise. But I’ll say this now, the only thing I dedicate myself to is my ambition. I’ll be the world's greatest swordsman! If you ever get in the way of that you better accept responsibility, and apologize by splitting your own stomach!”

“World's greatest swordsman? Sounds great! Nothing less would do for the King of the Pirates crew!” Luffy responds.

“The King of the Pirates should accept no less for a First Mate too,” I mutter, looking pointedly at my stupid bitch of a Captain. He just scrunches his nose and sticks his tongue out at me. Real fucken mature.

“You better duck,” he announces, then rears his foot back and whips it around, taking out a whole swath of soldiers.

“Seriously, what *are* you?” Zoro asks through the hilt of his sword.

Luffy runs into the remaining crowd fist swinging. “Shishishi, I’m a rubber man!”

Zoro nearly spits out his sword. “A fucking *what?”*

I just shake my head at him. “Devil Fruit,” I say like an explanation. He squints at me with a face of ‘that didn’t help at all’ as Luffy shoots past us to throw a punch at Morgan.

He starts beating the actual crap out of the axe-handed asshole, but I have to stop watching when I hear a click at the side of my head. I turn and stare down the barrel of Helmeppo’s gun. “Ah.”

“Hold it Strawhat! Look over here!” Helmeppo yells triumphantly.

Luffy continues to punch Morgan until Zoro calls his attention over. He pauses his beat down temporarily to look up at me. We make eye contact and I just offer a small smirk. He smiles back.

I turn back to Helmeppo, still smirking. “Better make that shot count. Don’t miss,” I taunt. His already shaking hand starts shaking even more at my apparent nonchalance. Which is a good thing, since I’m freaking out so bad internally I might just cause myself a hernia.

Too bad he isn’t telling me to sing the Sofia The First theme song. I could crush that.

“Hear that ya idiot? Ed isn’t scared of you!” Luffy laughs as he starts winding his fist up and taking a few steps forward.

“Stop moving! I swear I’ll shoot!” Helmeppo shrieks.

Luffy does not, in fact, stop. Even as Morgan rears up behind him ready to lop his head off, he whips his arm forward to punch Helmeppo in his smug face. Again.

I see Zoro stop Morgan in his tracks as Helmeppo falls beside me. I snatch his falling pistol out of the air, only fumbling it a bit as I try to figure out if this damn thing has a safety and shoving it into my waistband.

I hear the Marine troops start cheering and celebrating as I trot up to the boys. “Geez, *everyone* hated his ass, huh?”

“Guess so…” Zoro mumbles, then falls to the ground with a groan. “Fuuuuck I’m hungry!”

This dude…

Chapter End Notes

Woo chapter three! We are steadily chugging along.

It's so fun to write Zoro when he just has no goddamn clue what's going on. Good for the soul. Also Ed getting a weapon! That can only end well...

Also fun fact, I was actually great at kayaking.

Chapter 4: Chapter Four: It’s Like Sharing a Dream With Someone

Chapter Summary

The Fall - half•alive

“Our pirate adventure is finally starting!” Luffy proclaims, looking out across the water.

“I get the feeling some crazy shit is waiting for us,” Zoro muses.

“You have no fucking idea,” I mumble. He just smirks at me.

Chapter Notes

Yeah me updating in the middle of the week again... I do what I want.

Me: I don't have an addiction problem
Also me: If I don't get the dopamine rush from posting I'll die

This chapter brought to you in part by my friends who can now read this fic because they got AO3 accounts specifically to read it. If you're reading this; your mom xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We find ourselves in Rika’s moms restaurant once again, this time for a post battle victory meal. It’s a good thing this is being paid for by gratitude, since I still have precisely zero currency that can be used in this world… I should probably fix that at some point.

“I’m stuffed! After three weeks I was ready to eat my own shoes,” Zoro sighs.

“You’re done already?” Luffy asks while still stuffing dishes in his mouth.

“Your appetite fascinates me,” I state as I pick at my teeth with a toothpick. I give him a curious stare. “Have you ever actually digested a plate?”

He scratches his chin and thinks for a second. “Maybe..?”

I nod. “Fascinating.”

“Thank you so much for the food,” Coby says sheepishly, turning to Rika’s mom.

She just laughs. “My pleasure, you saved our town after all!” Then she turns to give me specifically a smile. “And for stepping in earlier.”

I wave a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. Helmeppo just needed a good kick in the balls to get his ego bruised. Maybe he’ll make something of himself now that he’s out of his dad’s shadow.”

Maybe these people will one day even be proud to say Helmeppo-the-Marine is from here. (In a long long *long* time when they’ve forgotten absolutely everything about Helmeppo-the-brat.)

“You’re so strong and cool!” Rika awes at Luffy.

“Yeah I know! I’ll be even more amazing when I’m King of the Pirates, and have the best crew!” he grins back.

“Speaking of that, how many others are there?” Zoro asks. Me and Luffy both hum in question. “Your crew, you said you were still gathering it. So how many others are there, besides us three?”

“Just us!” “Yeah it’s literally only the three of us,” me and Luffy reply at the same time.

Zoro's face twists into a look not dissimilar to Luffy's 'you're dumb' face. "Do you at least have a ship?" he asks desperately. Luffy's grin widens as he points out the window to the craptastic dinghy we stole from Alvida. There's a moment of silence as Zoro contemplates his life choices. "Please say you're kidding."

Luffy tosses his head back. "Shishishi, nope!" I can see the urge to jump ship (metaphorical, since we only have the dinghy) flash across his face.

"I think Luffy's missing the part of his brain we need for critical thinking…" Coby mumbles from his seat.

I give him a commiserating smile. "It's cute you think he has a brain at all."

"Luffy, where are you going now?" Rika asks, tugging on Luffy's arm.

He flashes his signature grin. "Isn't it obvious? We're headed for the Grand Line!"

Juice sprays from Coby's nose as he starts hacking and coughing. "Are you crazy?!" he wheezes out. "There's only three of you!"

I raise a hand. "2.5 at best. I'm like, barely a whole crew member."

Luffy makes a displeased noise and Zoro just raises an eyebrow, I simply shrug in response.

Coby continues losing his shit. "You're not equipped for the Grand Line! There's a reason they call it the Pirates Graveyard!"

Luffy just laughs and shakes his head. "That's what Ed's for! My super smart First Mate detective knows all about the Grand Line, so we'll be just fine!"

I give him the stink eye for use of the title. “Luffy I’m smart, but even *I* can’t save you from your own stupidity.”

Zoro barks out a laugh. “Well if the Captain says we’re headed for the One Piece, guess we have no choice.” He turns to Coby with a raised eyebrow. “Why are you worrying so much anyways? It’s not like you’re coming.”

Coby’s face scrunches up, “I know! It’s not like we’ve known each other for years or anything, but… we’re friends aren’t we?”

Luffy cocks his head with an easy smile. “Yeah! We might have to part ways, but we’ll always be friends!”

Coby’s face takes on a red hue. “I’ve never really had friends, much less anyone who would fight on my behalf… but you guys taught me to live for my beliefs! So I’ll make my dream come true, and join the Marines!”

“Shouldn’t you be a little more worried about yourself then?” Zoro pipes up. “You did spend two years on Alvida’s ship, even if it was just as a cabin boy. Never underestimate the Marines' information gathering skills.” Coby’s face falls.

A little inspiration couldn’t hurt.

I turn to Coby. “Hey,” I call. He makes a questioning noise. “Become an admiral or some shit. And be a decent one.” I poke him on the forehead, where one day he’ll sport a cross shaped scar. “Serve your own justice, not whatever trash they’re selling it as these days. You stay dedicated and nothing’ll stop you from joining, and becoming a top-class Marine.”

His expression is a cross between confused and determined. “What—” Coby’s response is cut off by the door swinging open and a Marine officer striding in.

“Pardon me,” he stops in front of our table, “I have to ask, are you really pirates?”

That was faster than I thought.

"Yup! We're up to three members, so the whole thing is official!" Luffy proclaims. First order of business after this should be beating some lying skills into this rubber weirdo.

"Hm. Seeing as you saved this town, we are very grateful for what you've done. But as Marines we cannot allow pirates to stick around here any longer." He sucks in a breath, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave this town. But out of respect we won't be reporting this to headquarters."

There's noises of shock and protest outside from the crowd, but Luffy just hops up from his chair. "Time to go then, thank you for the food!" Me and Zoro fall in line behind him as we start to walk out.

"Aren't you part of their crew?" I hear behind me. "Hey! Is he with you or what?"

Luffy turns and smiles. "What I can tell you is what he's been doing up till now."

Oh brother, I don't wanna watch this.

I grab onto Luffy by the scruff of his neck. "We don't really know the shrimp, we kidnapped him and forced him to take us here. You can have him," I say, almost bored.

"Wh—" Coby starts.

I cut him off. "Can it kid, I'll punch you in the face again."

I should write a book: The Art of Lying.

“Annoying brat wouldn’t shut up about being a Marine the whole fucking trip too. If nothing else, he’s sure got a pair on him,” I finish.

Luffy gives an enthusiastic nod. “Yup! Random guy we kidnapped! And he was never on a pirate ship!”

I give him a long stare. “...We’ll be leaving now. Have fun with him.”

The Marine guy knew Luffy was lying even when he beat the shit outta Coby, just general lying should have the same effect right?

Plus saves Coby a beat down.

I turn to give Coby a wink, then we make our way out of the restaurant toward our ship.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they saw right through your act,” Zoro says.

I shrug. “Even so, I think it’ll all work out.”

“Eh, it’ll be fine. Coby can handle himself!” Luffy starts unmooring our boat while I hop inside.

“It’s a fitting way to leave, though. Not being able to come back ‘cause everyone hates us. Very pirate-like,” Zoro muses.

“Hehe, exactly!” Luffy laughs back.

I roll my eyes with a smile. “I’m not gonna argue.”

It’s actually a little refreshing, not having to be perfectly polite to everyone I meet because I’ll probably never see them again. I am going to be such a dick.

“Luffy, Ed!” Coby’s voice calls from where he runs up behind us with Rika and her mother. “Thank you! I’ll never forget everything you’ve done for me!” He snaps into a salute while the three of us smile.

“Never seen a Marine thanking a pirate,” Zoro chuckles while he climbs onto the tiny boat.

“Kick ass while we’re apart!” I order.

“Let’s meet again sometime, Coby!” Luffy cheers while we start to pull out of the harbour. The rest of the Marines file in behind Coby and salute as well. “See ya!” Luffy calls.

“Men! Seeing as our current salute is in violation of Marine law, we will all go without food for three days!” the Marine officer yells.

“That’s stupid! Just run laps or something!” I yell back.

The officer looks bewildered then yells back, “then we will run laps instead!”

“Our pirate adventure is finally starting!” Luffy proclaims, looking out across the water.

“I get the feeling some crazy shit is waiting for us,” Zoro muses.

“You have no fucking idea,” I mumble. He just smirks at me.

Luffy plants a foot on the front of the ship. “I'm gonna be King of the Pirates!”

Zoro reclines into the weathered wood. “You seem pretty set on this King business. You got a special reason?”

“Nope. No reason. It’s just…” Luffy trails off, staring out across the water.

“Just?” Zoro prompts.

“Promised someone, a while back. I swore I’d gather a crew, find the world's greatest treasure, and become King of the Pirates.” He turns back to smile at us. “And this straw hat knows the whole story!”

The both of us smile right back at him. “I see,” Zoro murmurs.

“I’m sure that’s not the only one it knows either,” I muse, draping my arms across the side of our boat.

Luffy laughs. “Alright, now let’s go! Set sail for the Grand Line!”

Here we fucken go.

_____

There we did not fucken go.

I'm already starting to miss Coby's sea competency. Between the three of us we *almost* make up one full sailor, but not a single person on this damned vessel could navigate their way out of a wet paper bag. In fact, I'm not sure we could navigate out of a *parking lot.*

But that's beside the point. We're basically just drifting around waiting to find an island or something interesting. I specifically am waiting for a gigantic bird to snatch my Captain away and set us in the direction of Orange Town.

Right now I'm looking over the gun I snatched from Helmeppo. My understanding of guns is perfunctory at best — as far as I can tell it's some kind of flintlock pistol, which fits with the pirate era aesthetic.

But beyond that, I'm pretty sure most flintlocks during that time period were single shot. And this thing has enough for a half empty round in it, and I didn't steal any more bullets.

So conserving ammo is something I'll have to commit to, and keeping track of how many shots I have left will be paramount. With four bullets left in this thing I damn well better make 'em count.

"Hey Zoro," I start, tucking my pistol away and turning to the dozing swordsman. He cracks an eye open and hums to let me know here's listening. "Is your teeth enamel like… ok?"

"What," he deadpans, sitting up with both eyes open now.

"Like because of how you hold your sword. Your jaw strength has to be goddamn crazy, but are your teeth still… teeth?" He honestly looks seconds away from lunging across this boat to slap me. Maybe I should stop.

…Nah.

"Like do you have a built in groove in your teeth from constantly holding shit in there?" I continue. His snappening looks like it's edging closer with every word. "Real talk, can I take

a peek inside your mouth, just for a second—”

Zoro cuts me off. “If you don’t shut the fuck up right now I am going to toss you overboard.”

The look of dead seriousness is enough to make me back off. But the burning desire for knowledge still remains…

The boat returns to silence, save for the tune Luffy is humming at the front of the tiny ship. I’m just resting on my crossed arms taking in the view. I had never spent a lot of time near the ocean growing up, but I can definitely see why people retire to Florida now.

“Neh Ed, are you a girl or a boy?”

My relaxed posture immediately stiffens up before I forcefully untense the muscles. I turn to my Captain who is simply staring at me with that wide-eyed curiosity he seems to view the whole world through. I can see Zoro peek his eyes back open out of the corner of mine.

After a moment of silence I reply, “neither. Didn’t like being a girl, didn’t wanna be a boy. So I’m like the… mystery third option. Or something.”

I’m trying to not let my nerves show but goddamnit if I lose my ticket to the end of the Grand Line over my screwy gender expression I’ll eat my foot.

“You use they/them, then?” Zoro questions from his corner. I just nod in return. It’s a little surprising that Zoro of all people knows about pronouns, but I’m not going to complain. I guess he clocks my confusion because he grimaces and elaborates. “I had a friend when I was younger, had some issues with her gender. Learned a lot of shit once I set out to sea.”

I blink. “Oh.” Then I grimace. “Your friend, is she..?”

He nods. “Died when we were younger. Stupidly. Strongest person I knew,” he snaps his fingers, “gone like that.”

I give him a sympathetic look. “You meet a lot of queer people on the seas?” I wonder if that stereotype about gay people not being able to drive applies to boats…

He shrugs a single shoulder. “A few, you?”

How do I answer that without giving away that I’ve only existed here for like, a few days?

“I knew a lot where I was from, but that's because gay people attract each other like magnets. Haven’t met a whole lot on the open seas yet.” Then I clock onto Luffy’s silence and thinking face. “If it helps, Luffy, you can just think of me like a… swarm of bees or something. To help you get the pronouns right.” Honestly I think I’ll settle for him just not kicking me over the side of the boat.

He appears to come to a conclusion and flashes me his signature grin. “That’s fine, I’ll just remember! You’re kinda like… a snail! They don’t have genders sometimes. Ooh or a worm!”

My mouth drops into an O before breaking into a soft smile. “A snail, huh? If it works it works… Thank you, Captain.”

He just laughs. “Why’re you saying thanks? You’re my First Mate, it’d be stupid to get it wrong.”

That… went amazing. Christ that tops how this went with my dad by about a mile. Guess it was kinda stupid to think the poster child for freedom would get pissy about me breaking gender norms, but irrational fears gonna be irrational.

“Hey wait!” I clock onto his words. “I told you, I can’t be First Mate! Make Zoro do it!”

Zoro just crosses his arm and shakes his head. “Hell no. I don’t need that kinda responsibility,” then he glares at me, “and you shouldn’t run from it. Your job. You do it.”

This bitch…

“And! You gotta balance out my stupidity. Zoro is too stupid for that!” Luffy grins.

Zoro nods his head in agreement before snapping his head back to our idiot Captain with a, “hey!”

I grimace. “It takes more than *smart* to be First Mate. You know I can’t fight, like at all, right? The best I’ve got is this gun I stole from Helmeppo. I don’t even know how to shoot!” I wave said gun around to emphasize my point.

“If you don’t know how it works don’t fucking swing it like that!” Zoro shouts, hitting the deck to avoid a rogue swing from smacking him in the head. From the ground Zoro scrunches his face at me. “Besides, it also takes more than *strong* to be First Mate too. Strength in place of leadership is doomed to fall apart.” That was… surprisingly insightful. “And I don’t wanna have any hand in steering this shitshow.” There it is.

I violently shake my head. “You’re assuming I’ve got leadership skills! I hate to break it to you buddy, but I’m not exactly the first person people think of when they want someone in charge.”

The blank stare gets blanker. “You don’t have to be giving orders to have authority. Leadership is whatever you decide it’s gonna look like. You just need to make people respect you.”

I reflect his blank face back at him. “Uh huh. And that’s gonna work *soooo great* with people who only respect strength. My weak ass couldn’t even get my *cat* to respect me!” That trademark Zoro Confusion™ returns. I open my mouth to continue.

Luffy interrupts me. “But you’re gonna get stronger, right?” I stop to turn to my Captain. “You’re not gonna be weak forever. And until then you can just detective stuff instead!”

Damn, his big sunny smile is hard to argue with! “Detective isn’t a verb…” I trail off.

I feel like I’m stealing something. Like I’ve just killed a part of Zoro he doesn’t even know he was supposed to have. How the fuck do I measure up to the guy who would take on all of his Captain’s pain like on Thriller Bark, who would do anything he asked at the drop of a hat with zero questions asked, who could organize a batship crew like the Strawhats almost effortlessly?

Next to the First Mate Zoro would be, I’m practically nothing.

But…

“You sure you can’t pick someone else?” I ask one last time, an edge of desperation creeping into my voice.

Luffy’s smile widens impossibly further. “Nope! No one but you will do!” I sigh and slump down into the boat.

But Luffy’s made up his mind. Maybe I won’t be the super strong First Mate the crew deserves, but I’ll damn well work to earn the title if he insists.

“…Fine.”

“Fine?” Luffy parrots excitedly, scrambling across the tiny boat to sit in front of me.

“Fine,” I repeat.

Then Luffy flings himself at me and we, once again, go overboard while I flail and scream. “GODDAMNIT LUFFY—”

Stupid Captain.

Chapter End Notes

More of a transition chapter today. Next chapter is gonna be the start of Orange Town and Nami time, yeehaw.

Working full-time is hard and I'm sad :(

Chapter 5: Chapter Five: See Our Friends, See The Sights, Feel Alright

Chapter Summary

Alright - Supergrass

You get one guess as to what happens when we start rowing. Here's a hint; Zoro is a whole lot better and faster at it than I am. "WHY THE FUCK ARE WE TURNING? I CANNOT BE GETTING US LOST THAT FAST!"

Chapter Notes

Me, only replying to comments with questions because it's easier and I don't know how to respond to praise: I am so engaging

This song is so Strawhat coded. Does anyone even actually listen to the songs I title these after???

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took another three hours of aimless drifting and stupid questions (including but not limited to "do you poop?" and "have you ever fought a bear?") but I now understand why everyone on the goddamn crew is always hitting Luffy. He just makes it so *easy* .

Anyways. The three of us are just sitting in our dumb little boat, existing. "Don't you find it a little stupid that the future King of the Pirates and his First Mate don't have a single navigational skill between them?" Zoro questions with a groan, rubbing a hand across his face.

"Watch it buddy, I never even wanted to sail! I'm here by coincidence and happenstance," I say wagging my finger at him.

Luffy just shrugs. "I just kinda drift around… weren't you some kinda famous bounty hunter?"

Zoro rolls his eyes. “I never called myself a bounty hunter.”

I pump my fist in the air. “Called it!” Hey man, I’m allowed to abuse my future knowledge to seem smart. Literally who’s gonna stop me?

He shoots a glare at me. “Anyways! I only set out to find a certain man, then I couldn’t get back to my village. By that point collecting bounties was my best bet at survival.”

Luffy just blinks that wide-eyed cat-like stare. “Oh, so you’re lost.”

Zoro jolts forward, teeth bared. “Don’t say it like that!”

Me and Luffy both burst into laughter as I lean across the boat to give him a high five. “Zoro I will bet every berri on me that you tried to go back for something five minutes later and just *couldn’t.”*

“Hah!” his face turns smug as he holds out his hand, “pay up, it actually took *fifteen* minutes for me to try and go back!”

I stare at his hand for a second before slapping it in a mockery of the high five I gave Luffy. “Sorry sweet cheeks, I have precisely zero berri to my name.”

I think Zoro’s squawking is one of my new favourite sounds. Then he’s lunging across the boat to tackle me to the ground, so I latch onto and pull Luffy down with me with a strangled yelp.

“You people fucking *suck.”*

The three of us are lying on the deck staring up at the sky, and a pink bird drifts into view. “Oh hey, bird. That means land’s nearby.” I think. That’s how seabirds work right?

Luffy springs up beside me. “Finally! I’m super hungry!”

“Wait a second—” I think about grabbing onto Luffy and maybe hitching a ride to Orange Town like that, but eeeeh. So I let Luffy latch onto the bird's face with his stretchy arms, then get his head chomped down on.

“AH! ED, ZORO SAVE ME!” comes the muffled screaming as Zoro jumps to his feet.

“Ah shit! Captain!” He turns to me with that confused/horrified look I’m honestly getting attached to. “Why’d you let him do *that?!”*

I just shrug. “Fools gonna be fools?” Then I register that the bird is very quickly flying away from our dinghy. “SHIT ZORO GET THE PADDLES!” I whip my head around and almost get smacked in the face by a flying oar.

“Already ahead of you, idiot! Now fucking ROW!” he demands. I sit my ass down and do just that. I pump my arms like I’m back in the ocean actively drowning.

Now seems like a good time to explain the physics of rowing. When equal pressure is applied on both sides of a vessel, it moves forward at accelerated speeds. When more pressure is applied on one side but not the other, the vessel will begin to turn.

You get one guess as to what happens when we start rowing. Here’s a hint; Zoro is a whole lot better and faster at it than I am. “WHY THE FUCK ARE WE TURNING? I CANNOT BE GETTING US LOST *THAT* FAST!”

“ZORO I WAS CURSED WITH NOODLE ARMS THIS ISN’T GOING TO WORK!” I scream.

He doesn’t even grace me with a coherent response, he just starts yelling and snatches the other paddle from my hands. That knocks me right on my ass onto the floor.

With only Zoro propelling us we start flying through the water after the stupid pink bird and our stupid rubber Captain, stretched limbs still flapping in the wind and screaming getting fainter.

We very quickly come up on three weirdos flailing in the water calling, “hey, you there! Help us! Man overboard!”

Zoro just shouts back, “I’m not stopping! If you want on, do it yourself!” I’m still just sat in the bottom of the boat where I fell off the bench.

They do, jump in that is. In a frankly impressive show of acrobatics and upper body strength, with finesse that implies this definitely has happened before, they clamber onto our now very cramped dinghy.

“Thank you,” one huffs, before he whips a knife out of fucking nowhere and points it directly at my face, “but in the name of Buggy the Clown we’re taking over this boat now!” I just slump down further into the boat as Zoro's face hardens into a glare.

Three swift knocks to the skull later, we have three idiots rowing us after our Captain. There is so little room in the dinghy now that I’m basically sprawled between Zoro's legs where he’s sat at the back.

“I’m sorry, we had no idea you were the famous Pirate Hunter Zoro! Please forgive us!” the guy with the knife simpers.

Zoro just glowers at him. “Thanks to you three idiots we lost sight of our Captain. So. Just. Keep. Paddling.”

The weirdos have a quiet conversation amongst themselves that Zoro interrupts to ask, “so who’s this Buggy guy?”

They all adopt this scandalized expression and shout, “you’ve never heard of Buggy the Clown?!”

It’s almost scary how they can speak in unison like that… Zoro gives an uncaring shrug. “Nope.”

The guy on the left clenches his fist dramatically. “Our Captain’s ruthless! He’s eaten a Devil Fruit, so he’s truly unique!”

“Uh huh. Cute, now keep rowing,” I glare at the three stooges.

One of them cries out, “do you just not care?!”

I roll my eyes. “No bitch! I know *exactly* who Buggy the Clown is, that’s why I don’t give a singular shit.” That stuns the three pirates into silence.

“Keep fucking rowing!” Zoro snaps.

“Yes sir!” the idiots yelp, immediately snapping back into frantic rowing.

I turn my glare back at Zoro as I slump into his legs. “Why do they only listen to you?”

He just smirks down at me. “Because I’m intimidating.”

_____

We pull into the harbour at Orange Town approximately 40 minutes later, the three Buggy pirates we essentially kidnapped and put through forced labour huffing and puffing on the ground behind us.

“Guess we better find this Buggy guy, ask about the Captain,” Zoro muses.

“Knowing our luck, that idiot is probably already fighting him,” I respond, just in time for a loud boom and huge plume of smoke to blow upward across town.

We both make silent eye contact and sigh. “There he is.”

We both start to jog the direction of the origin of the explosion. “You think he’s winning?” Zoro asks.

I scoff. “Bet you he’s stuck in a cage right now, or something equally stupid.”

Zoro shoots me an incredulous look. “A cage? No way. I’ll take that bet, since you have no money I’ll start you a tab.” That smug look on his face… I’m going to crush it.

This seems like a totally responsible way to use my other worldly knowledge. Scamming Zoro seems like the only appropriate way to jumpstart my funds. “How’s 1,000 berri sound?”

If I’m going by real world standards, berri and yen seem to have the same value. So by that logic 1,000 berri would roughly equate to $10 CAD. Probably.

Zoro scoffs. “Sounds great, as soon as you come into some money you’ll be spending it on drinks for me.” I just stick out my tongue, smirk and pick up my pace.

Eventually the circus tent and pirate gathering comes into view, which we only see from the rooftop of a building Zoro *somehow* managed to lead us to.

“Seems the party got started without us,” Zoro huffs, charging ahead of me and leaping across other roofs.

“How the fuck did we even get up here?”

I can see the concrete cage Luffy is trapped in, as well as Nami hunched over the cannon's fuse. “Behind you!” Luffy yells, right in time for Zoro to jump in between the pirates and Nami and stop their blows with two of his swords.

He smirks at them, eyes hooded by his bandana. “How many of you have to attack one girl at the same time?”

“Zoro!” Luffy cheers while I finally make it over to the roof, saddling right up to the cage.

Zoro looks over the scene incredulously. “The hell you doing Captain? First a bird and now cannons?”

I cough from beside Luffy, who immediately cheers, “Ed!”

Then I knock on the top of Luffy’s cage “Would you look at that? Our Captain, in a *cage.* Sure hope you’ve got that 1,000 berri, I’d hate to start you a tab.”

Zoro just gives an irritated huff. “Ed! What’re you talking about? Get me outta here now!” Luffy whines through the bars he’s gnawing on.

“Luf, you goddamn idiot, you got kidnapped by a *bird.* I thought the first sucker to try it would at least have to convince you to do it yourself!” I reach through the bars to pull Luffy's ear.

“But Eeeeed, I was sooooo hungry…” he groans, blinking up at me imploringly.

“So you’re Roronoa Zoro, the Pirate Hunter,” a new voice announces. Coming up behind Zoro I can see the horrendously dressed form of Buggy the Clown. Now honestly, there’s no way to sugar coat it. I’ll be totally transparent, I’m a huge fan of Buggy.

At least *fanon* Buggy. The *competent* Buggy. And I will pray that this Buggy isn’t just a blithering fool, but I’m not going to hold my breath for it.

“You must be here for my head then!” he declares, foot up on a box in a dramatic pose.

Zoro scoffs. “Not interested. I’m not a pirate hunter anymore. I’m just those idiot's crewmate, nothing more nothing less.”

I place my hand over my heart and bat my eyes. “Aw Zoro you don’t have to get all sentimental on us now!”

His grumbling is drowned out by Buggy’s sneering. “I’m interested though! Killing you would bolster my reputation.”

Zoro just rolls his shoulders and shrugs. “Your funeral.”

It barely takes a second for Zoro to lunge at Buggy and chop him into pieces.

“Damn, that was easy,” he almost sounds disappointed. The gasps of the Buggy pirates are quick to turn into snickers as Luffy asks again to be let out of the cage.

“That didn’t actually kill him,” I announce, much to the shock of the pirates surrounding us. “His Devil Fruit doesn't let him get cut.” Then I pull out my pistol and *attempt,* and I do

mean attempt because I miss wildly, to shoot the hand Buggy has poised to stab Zoro.

Three bullets left. So much for conserving them.

Though the bullet misses by a fucking mile it still shocks the clown enough that he drops the knife. His body springs up from the floor, completely unharmed, face white and screaming. "HOW THE HELL DID YOU KNOW THAT?!"

My best response is to blow him a dramatic kiss and say, "didn't you know Buggy darling, you're famous!" Which I follow by whispering to Nami and Luffy, "Famously bad at being a small-time pirate." They both start giggling.

Buggy shows his prowess as a performer with his quick recovery, barely missing a beat before he puffs out his chest and surreptitiously wipes the sweat from his brow with a cocky grin. "That's right! The Chop Chop Fruit, that's the name of the Devil Fruit I ate! Now I'm a Chop Chop man who can't be cut!"

Nami's nose scrunches up in distaste beside me. "His body detached itself? I thought Devil Fruits were a myth…"

"Chop Chop man?! You mean he's a monster?!" Luffy gasps.

I kick his cage in response. "Pot calling the kettle black…"

"Well if swords aren't gonna work I'm fresh out of ideas," Zoro sighs.

"Guess you really are a one trick pony," I mumble.

"I wanna fight the big nose guy!" Luffy yells.

…

The ensuing silence is very loud.

"…Fuck," Nami groans quietly.

"Who's… got a big nose?!" Buggy screams, whipping around to throw a knife directly at Luffy through the bars. Nami and Zoro both gasp and I jerk back from the cage.

"Buggy!" Luffy yells through the knife he *somehow* caught in his teeth, "I'm gonna kick your ass!"

Buggy just starts hysterically laughing. "You? Kick my ass? How about I just kill the four of you right here!"

"We're fucked," Nami mutters while looking around anxiously at the chuckling Buggy pirates.

Luffy's obnoxious laugh cuts right through it. "I refuse to die! Zoro, Ed, run!"

"What? They came to save you! What're you going to do?" Nami yells back at him.

"What?" Zoro asks incredulously. Luffy just keeps smiling. Zoro stares for a second before smirking. "Understood."

"Impudent fools! As if I'd let you escape!" Buggy shrieks as he attacks Zoro in a flurry of blades. Zoro bisects him and we make eye contact between the billows of his cape. Zoro dives right between his separated halves and makes a dash for the cannon the same time I do.

“Fool! Your three sword style has — hey listen when I’m talking to you!” Buggy turns around just in time for a view of me and Zoro flipping the cannon.

“Lift with your legs, lift with your legs,” I mumble under my breath, Zoro just shoots me an amused look.

“Shit! The cannon is pointed at us!” Buggy screeches.

“Light the damn thing!” Zoro grits out. Nami rushes to do just that.

“Wait wait WAIT—”

The ensuing explosion is large and exceedingly satisfying.

———

Between me and Zoro, hauling Luffy around in a big concrete cage is not exactly what I would call pleasant, but it is manageable. “Who the hell are these people?” I hear Nami mumble to herself.

“Luffy, who’s this girl?” Zoro asks, completely unwinded despite the sweat breaking out on my everything. Little shit.

“Oh! She’s our new navigator!” he cheers, seemingly enjoying his elevated carrier cage ride.

“Seriously, who are you guys?” Nami asks again.

“Can you move? You’re in the way,” Zoro says instead. I just shrug helplessly at her as we keep moving with our packaged Captain.

We leave Nami behind and get a solid few blocks away before I stop, letting my half of the cage slam into the ground. Luffy yelps as he smacks into the bars. “Ok, I’m not athletic enough to keep this shit up.”

“You act like you’ve never had to run for your life with cargo before,” Zoro observes.

I shoot him an unimpressed look from where I’m hunched over the cage. “No shit, not all of us make stupid decisions to get into those situations!”

I cough a little and Luffy peeks up at me through the bars. “Do you need water Ed? Zoro! Go get us water!” he demands.

Zoro just blinks. “They can get it themselves.”

“But your legs are longer, c’mon Zoro I saved your life earlier!” I whine back, laying down on top of the cage and kicking my feet.

“For fucks — fine!” He then goes stalking off down the street. Then I realize that we just sent off Zoro without a guide. Fuck, won’t be seeing him for a few hours, if ever again.

“That’s probably going to bite us in the ass,” I mention to Luffy, who just hums.

“Hey, a dog,” he announces, pointing through the bars at the fucking dog right beside us I failed to notice.

I blink. “Oh, a dog.”

“It’s not moving, is it dead?” Luffy, like every five year old ever, immediately tries to poke the dog. And gets his face attacked for his stupidity. He starts screaming and trying to retreat

further into the cage.

“Don’t fucking provoke the dog!” I yell at him, doing absolutely nothing to help because he deserves this one.

“I leave you guys alone for a few minutes and this is what you get up to?” I hear Nami's voice question behind us. “One being lazy, one missing, and one being beat up by a dog?”

“Hey, our navigator!” Luffy cheers, seemingly forgetting the dog still chewing on his arm.

“Says who?!” she yells back, looking like she wants to join the dog in his attack. What’s its name again? Shushu or something? “I just came to repay my debt to you, for saving me back there.” She tosses us the key, which I guess she stole at some point.

“You got the key!” we exclaim at the same time.

She scoffs. “Yeah, it was kinda stupid. Because of it it couldn’t steal any treasure…”

I offer her a small smile. “Thanks, Nami.”

I reach for the key, but the dog apparently has some ninja background skills I didn’t know about, because he chomps down on it seconds before I can grab it. He just gulps the fucker down.

There’s a moment of silence as I debate the moral ramifications of trying to cut a dog open with my penknife, but Luffy saves me the trouble by reaching through the bars to choke the dog out.

“THAT'S NOT FOOD YOU DUMB DOG SPIT IT OUT—”

Wow he’s getting violent, do they have a PETA in this world I should call? That poor rat bitches stomach…

“Hey! Leave Chouchou alone!” someone comes screaming down the road. A man I assume is the mayor, suited up in armour and looking ready to evaporate Luffy cage and all, storms up to us.

Ah, that’s what its name was. “Who’re you?” Nami asks.

The man scoffs, “I’m the mayor of this town! Who’re you?!” Then he seems to pause for a second, taking in the cage and my winded form. He heaves a heavy sigh. “You must have met Buggy then.”

“Yup, he sucks,”

“Yeah, what a dick,”

Me and Luffy answer simultaneously. He just nods empathically.

“So this dog's name is Chouchou?” Nami asks, patting said dog's head.

“Why’s he just sitting here?” Luffy asks, arms tucked in and giving Chouchou a wary stare.

I climb back onto the cage and fold my legs up to sit criss-cross applesauce, heedless of Luffy's quiet complaint of, “I’m not a chair…”

“He’s guarding this pet store,” The mayor answers, pulling out a pipe and lighting it.

He then begins to weave a sad tale of a dog, his master, and undying loyalty.

Chapter End Notes

Orange Town yaaay! And finally Nami arrives! I was so torn between making her and Ed absolutely hate each other you have no idea. There's still time...

Chapter 6: Chapter Six: No Amount of Fear Will Keep You Safe

Chapter Summary

> *Keep You Safe - The Crane Wives*
>
> She opens her mouth, probably to make another commiserating comment, when an ear splitting roar sounds down the street. The mayor immediately loses his shit, yelling, “it’s Beast Tamer Mohji! We gotta run!” Then he and Nami book away from us as fast as they can.

Chapter Notes

> Love how I said once a week updates and then proceeded to not do that at all. I left work early because my ass got sick which is great for you losers who get this now.
>
> We got brief misgendering and a healthy dose of that Canon-Typical Violence tag up in this bitch, fair warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> By the end of the mayor's tale Nami is on the verge of tears, Luffy is actually quiet for once, and I’m stuck thinking about another dog entirely.
>
> “But if Chouchou knows his master is dead, why is he still here?” Nami asks, looking honest to god heartbroken.
>
> “He obviously thinks of this store like his treasure, the last thing his master left for him,” the mayor answers.
>
> I smear my hands down my face mumbling, “what in the Hachiko…”
>
> Luffy tries to look up at me through the bars. “What’s a hatchimal?” I’m starting to think he doesn’t even try with words he doesn’t know.

“Hachiko. It's a story where I’m from. This dog waited at a train station for 7 years for his owner to return. The owner was dead, and the dog probably knew that, but he still stayed and waited,” I answer.

The movie based on that dog made me fucking bawl the first time I watched it. Nami somehow gets even closer to tears, bottom lip jutting out in an effort to keep them in.

She opens her mouth, probably to make another commiserating comment, when an ear splitting roar sounds down the street. The mayor immediately loses his shit, yelling, “it’s Beast Tamer Mohji! We gotta run!” Then he and Nami book away from us as fast as they can.

Luffy just turns back to Chouchou. “C’mon, somethings come up. I need the key now.” The heavy fall of paws behind us has my neck hair raising and me fighting every instinct to flatten myself on top of the cage like a pancake.

“It seems all your friends have abandoned you, and just after you escaped.”

I can’t even make myself turn around, but I see Luffy stick his nose out of the cage and ask, “who’re you?”

“I’m Beast Tamer Mohji, a member of the Buggy Pirates.”

His answer prompts me to turn, and when I do I fail to hold in my snort. Good lord the character design in this show never fails to be fucking ridiculous.

It’s a man wearing a fuzzy crop top with the most ridiculous hairstyle I’ve seen yet. “You look super stupid,” Luffy says, like an idiot. But I have to agree. It’s like… the worst type of casual furry-wear.

“This is my hair!” he shrieks, hunching forward on the huge fucking lion that is snarling in my face right now. “Do you think you’re safe in that cage of yours? What about your vulnerable friend out here?”

I try to quietly and unnoticeably scoot off the cage to hide behind it. It doesn’t really work.

“You must not know about my terrifying skill! There’s no animal in the world who won’t obey me!” He hops down off his lion mount, who’s name I think is Richie? He saunters right up to Chouchou and puts a hand out. “Shake!”

Chouchou, like the little asshole he is, just bites him on the hand. He snatches that back with an undignified yelp and scoots back toward the lion.

“You’re just common thieves.” Wow this guy moves on fast. One way to deal with embarrassment I guess. “Tell me where Roronoa Zoro is and I’ll have no reason to kill you.”

“No!” Luffy stubbornly yells.

Mohji’s face turns furious and he screams “Kill them Richie!” The big cat wastes no time in pouncing on the cage.

The cage I’m currently sitting on.

Five things happen in rapid succession.

Luffy screams, “ED MOVE!”

I attempt to fall off the back of the cage.

I get smacked by Richie so hard it feels like getting hit by a Honda Civic. Again.

The cage is destroyed and Luffy is freed.

I go flying.

I soar through the street, only coming to an abrupt stop as I slam into a building. After flying through an entire fucking alleyway. I don't know if that was lucky as hell or done specifically to hurt me.

"ED!" I hear Luffy cry out, then a loud slam as I assume Richie pounds him into a building as well.

My entire world is technicolor from the pain. My bones are fucking vibrating, my entire right side is lit up from the pain of skidding, and there's a hot pain in my stomach. Why the fuck do anime characters always seem fine after getting slammed through buildings?! This fucking *hurts!*

I can hear more talking and crashing from the direction I flew from, but it's secondary to the Big Ouch my entire universe has shrunk down to.

I finally manage to crane my neck and get a look at whatever the hell is so wrong with my stomach.

Oh.

The gaping bloody gash might do it. I guess one of Richie's claws caught me on my way out. Good fucking god *ow.*

I hiss out a sharp breath as I try to manoeuvre into a better position. It's taking every ounce of concentration to stop myself from screaming bloody murder. I should put pressure on the

wound, that's what you're supposed to do right?

…

My every cell lights up *red.* The signals my body is sending my brain feel like they're written in Archaic Latin. *Dude* , are stomach wounds supposed to hurt this fucking bad?!

Good fucking GOD that was a bad idea! I definitely might have let out a small scream with that brilliant move. The slippery slide of blood on my hands is making me a little nauseous.

Fuck fuck *fuck.* What kinda idiot gets cut open by a stupid fucking lion?! The thing was huge! Why the fuck didn't I move? God almighty today has fucking *sucked.*

"Ed! Ed can you hear me?" I vaguely hear through the static in my ears. Is that Luffy? A red and yellow blob enters my blurry peripheral vision, before my Captain's worried face takes up my entire view.

"Are you ok? Are you bleeding? You went flying!" he starts rambling. I reach up a hand and smear it across his face, a streak of red follows it.

"M'fine," I slur out. "S'not that bad. Being dramatic."

Because honestly it isn't even that deep. I think. It's kinda hard to think through the pain, but that's probably just because I'm not used to getting fucked up yet. As a pirate, shit like this is bound to happen all the time!

That's not reassuring at all.

Luffy grabs onto my hand heedless of the blood coating it. "Ed you don't sound fine. What do I do?" He actually sounds… concerned? It doesn't suit him.

I can make out orange and brown blobs running up near us. Nami's voice filters through the miasma. "Holy shit…"

"Really, m'fine," I mumble out again.

The mayor pulls Luffy's face back a bit so he can get a look. "That actually doesn't seem too bad. Orange one, help me get her to my house."

"Them. Not a girl," Luffy corrects, scooching back to let Nami closer while not letting go of my hand.

The mayor pauses for a second, before hooking his arms under my shoulders and motioning for Nami to grab my legs. "Then let's get them to my house." My hand slips out of Luffy's as we start to move.

I look back at his pinched face over the mayor's shoulder. "Fucken get em' Capt'n. I'll be fine." His eyebrow furrows before his face hardens. His fist raises up to smear the blood across his cheek and he gives me a solemn nod.

I smirk at him. "Being serious doesn't suit you. Lighten up." I relish in the quick surprise that flashes across his face before we turn the corner.

_____

It only takes a couple minutes for the mayor, surprisingly adept at treating injuries, to give the wonderful news that I should be fine. "You'll probably be back to normal in the next couple days. Just keep the moving to a minimum for a few hours."

The healing rate in this world is fucking fascinating. Wait, does that apply to me? I did notice the pain making a steady and surprisingly fast decline over the last few minutes…

Weird.

Anyways I'm grateful for it. Back home this would have crippled me for weeks, maybe months, if not outright killing me. Here I'm getting off Scot free with what will be a superficial scar and some wicked bruising up my right side.

The mayor passes me a glass of water while helping me sit up, and I'm reminded that we should probably collect Zoro's stupid ass at some point.

I open my mouth to ask if they saw him when they ran away, but something interrupts me. Me and the mayor both whip our heads to the door as we hear Nami's yelling filter through.

"You're all the same! Maybe I should just kill you now, one less pirate in the world!" This is gonna sound a bit assholish, but I kinda forgot about Nami's traumatic hangups about pirates…

The mayor jumps up to race out the door, and I'm left trying to stand up without ripping my stomach open without help. I'd call it inconsiderate, but I really should *not* be moving right now.

By the time I make it to the door frame, pain lancing up my side and sweat on my brow, I can see the mayor holding a shocked Nami back. And my Captain, my stupid sentimental honourable Captain, saying a few words to the crying dog he's just given the last of his treasure back.

Chouchou picks up the box and begins trotting away, stopping to bark something back at Luffy. He responds with a smile, "thanks! Good luck to you too!" Then the dog is off to wherever to do whatever.

Luffy turns back to Nami and the mayor, then spots me in the doorway and his face splits in a huge dazzling grin. He scrambles towards me yelling, "Ed! Are you better now? Does it still hurt? I beat up the lion guy! One punch!"

He stops right in front of me, giving me a scrutinizing look over before he seems to find the best angle of attack to hug me from without jostling my wound.

"Yeah, yeah. Good job Luf. I'm fine, I'll be right as rain before you know it," I murmur, patting him on the back.

He just shoves his face into the crook of my neck and mumbles, "don't get stabbed again, dummy." I laugh as much as my stomach will let me. "I'm serious! Don't get *stabbed!"*

I manage to laugh a little harder before curling into him with a groan. *"Fuuuuuck,* yeah I don't plan on it. This fucking *sucks!"*

The mayor shakes a fist at me from where he's stood with Nami, who has a conflicted look on her face. "I told you to keep the moving to a minimum! Darn kids…"

_____

"Sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to yell at you," Nami apologizes, scuffing a toe on the ground. Luffy untangles himself from me enough that he's only helping support me with an arm under my shoulders.

"It's ok, you've been under a lot of stress!" Luffy smiles.

I wave the hand that isn't holding onto him at her. "Don't worry about it, I yell at him all the time." Nami offers me a small smile.

The mayor suddenly explodes into a rage-filled rant. "I'm pathetic, Chouchou and this young'un have fought so hard, yet I, the mayor, have done nothing but watch our town be obliterated!"

Nami rushes around to face the mayor to plead with him. “Calm down, mayor!” Luffy drags me after them so we’re standing in the middle of the street.

The mayor does not in fact calm down. He continues his impassioned rant about how this town was built by its people from the ground up. “This town is a treasure to me and all the citizens! I refuse to let them terrorize it anymore!”

Then the row of houses directly beside us is decimated by a Buggy Ball induced explosion. The four of us are sent flying, my fall cushioned by Luffy imposing his rubber body between me and the ground.

“Sweet fuck!” I yell, scrambling up, arm wrapped around my stomach because *fucken yowch.* Everyone is quick to jump to their feet around me

“They’ll destroy it all!” the mayor despairs, looking on at his ruined house.

“Pirates…” Nami mumbles from beside me. Luffy looks on with an unreadable expression.

“Geez, I leave for 20 minutes. The hell happened?” And fucking Zoro comes striding out of the blown up mess of smoke and rubble. He has a singular half empty glass of water in his hand and the bewildered face of a man who had no idea where he was a few minutes ago.

He takes a quick look around as he ambles up to us, scanning over my worse for wear form with a raised eyebrow. I shake my head in disbelief.

“Did… did you actually come back to the right place with water?” I ask, genuinely amazed he managed it.

“Oh. Yeah this is for you.” He thrusts the cup in my direction. Who the hell did he steal this glass from?

I down the water in one shot.

“Ed got stabbed by a lion!” Luffy announces.

I turn to shoot an incredulous glare at him. “What’d you tell him that for?!”

Zoro’s brow furrows. “Did the lion have a knife?”

The glare turns to him. “No you idiot! He used his damn claws!”

His brow furrows further. “Like, attached to him? A real lion? Not a guy in a lion costume with knives?”

I stare at him, incredulous. “Why is this so hard for you to grasp?”

“It might have been a guy in a very good costume…” Luffy mumbles, scratching his forehead.

I smack him upside the head. “No it wasn't! Trust me, I have intimate proof!”

Nami mumbles behind us, “what the hell is wrong with these guys?”

The mayor, complexly ignoring our idiocy, hunches in on himself and scrapes a hand against his armour. “I refuse to let them get away with this! I won’t stand for it, I can’t let this scum destroy everything my townspeople worked for these past 40 years!” He snaps up ramrod straight and pounds a fist into his chest. “I am the mayor of this town! I will protect it and its inhabitants! I swear!”

He immediately tries to rush off to fight Buggy, but Nami latches onto him yelling, “stop! It’s reckless!”

He just keeps fighting to run. “There are some fights a man can’t run from!” He turns to face us. “Right?!”

Luffy just smiles his bright grin. “That’s right!”

Nami glares at us. “Don’t encourage him! It’s dangerous!”

The mayor rips out of Nami’s hold with tears in his eyes. “I know it’s dangerous!” He goes running down the street screaming, “I’m coming for you, Buggy the Clown!”

“The mayor was crying…” Nami mumbles.

“He was? I didn’t see anything,” Luffy replies with a cheeky grin.

“Looks like the party is getting more exciting,” Zoro adds. Luffy just laughs.

“How can you still laugh?” Nami demands.

Luffy keeps his big smile in place as he states, “don’t worry, I like that old man! I’m not gonna let him die!” Me and Zoro shake our heads with indulgent smiles.

Zoro starts walking, mumbling, “In that case…”

I tie my flannel around my waist and shrug. “If that’s how it is.”

“You too? What about your wound?!” Nami squawks at me.

I just smirk over at her. “I’m not gonna fistfight the clown. Just… fire some stray shots into the crowd.” She somehow looks even more flabbergasted.

Zoro ties up his bandanna. “Who knew it just took someone spilling your guts for you to use ‘em.”

I send him a playful glare. “Can it, Listerine.”

“The hell is Listerine?!”

“Our destination is the Grand Line. We better go steal that chart back!” Luffy declares, cracking his knuckles. Nami just watches the Captain in shock. He turns to her with his bright smile. “Join our crew, Nami!”

Her shock dissipates into a frown. “I’ll never be a pirate.” She smirks and smacks her palm to Luffy’s outstretched hand. “But I suppose we can team up, to achieve our common goal.”

I lean over to Zoro to whisper, “she has no idea the hole she just dug herself.”

He nods sagely back. “Not a clue.”

———

When we arrive at the scene of the fight the mayor is being choked out by Buggy’s floating hand. Luffy runs forward to rip it off him. “I’m here to kick your ass, just like I promised to Buggy!”

Buggy struggles to retrieve his hand, Luffy huffs a laugh and lets it go. “Strawhat…” Buggy grits out. The other three of us file in behind Luffy and the mayor, who’s hacking on the ground.

“How dare you! You can’t just waltz up to me like this! I’m Captain Buggy!” he screeches from the roof. I swear when he stomps his foot in emphasis there’s a comical squeak.

“Listen! I’m only here for the chart and the treasure, then I’m out of here!” Nami points at us with a glare.

Me and Zoro exchange amused glances. “Yup. Got it.”

“Get out of here, why did you follow me? You’re outsiders, leave this to me!” the mayor rasps out, hunched over himself on the ground. “This is my fight! I will protect my town!”

I can see Luffy gearing up for a punch, and I’m not about to have this entire town on our asses when this is over while I’m sporting a stab wound. So I launch myself at my mayor praying it won’t reopen my gash.

I tackle the man to the ground screaming, “I GOT HIM! BEAT UP THE CLOWN!” Nami and Zoro make shocked noises behind me, but my eyes are locked on Luffy as he lowers his fist.

“Ok! You got it!” he says with a wide smile.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” the mayor yells under me, squirming and trying to escape.

“Fucken — stay still! I will knock you out if I have to, but then I’ll have to explain this shit to your people and that’ll only end with us getting chased outta this bitch! Let my damn Captain take care of it!”

He tries to twist his head back to glare at me. “No! Like I said this is *my fight!* Let me up!”

I just put more of my body weight on him. “You—”

I’m cut off by Luffy screaming, “BIG NOOOOSE!” at the top of his lungs.

More strangled screaming comes from Buggy before he garbles out, “flashily fire the Buggy Ball!”

Aw shit. Better hope Luffy can stop that thing, cause I’m not moving anywhere soon. “You gotta let me up now! He’s gonna shoot us!” the mayor wails, still struggling.

I smack my forehead into the back of his head. “Quit it!”

From my grounded angle I can see the cannon go off, and the Buggy Ball bearing towards us at breakneck speeds. Then Luffy imposes himself between it and us with a laugh. “That won’t work!”

My entire view is taken up by Luffy blowing up to the size of a shed and flinging the cannon ball back at the screaming Buggy Pirates.

“What the fuck,” Zoro deadpans.

“What the fuck?” Nami whimpers.

“What the fuck…” the mayor wheezes.

“Fucken — Ok,” I sigh.

“Woohoo! I got some of them!” Luffy cheers.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Nami screeches from where she fell to her knees.

“You really know how to freak people out…” Zoro mutters.

I go back to ignoring that mess by flopping further onto the mayor with a murmur of, “yaknow, for someone who deals quite poorly with high stress situations, I sure picked a stupid career path.”

The mayor smushes his face into the street with a wheeze. “I hate to agree.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh we in it now boys. My poor baby :(I like to bully them <3 I promise I don't hate my characters it's not my fault they always end up hurt—

In other news, I'm up to writing Arlong Park now and whoo boy. Forgot how mad that guy makes me.

Chapter 7: Chapter Seven: What About The Kid? It's Time The Kid Got Free

Chapter Summary

The Love Club - Lorde

The whole experience is not unlike the time I tried to ride a mechanical bull, but much less fun since I have a hole in my side and I'm sitting on top of an old man, and I'm not getting $20 for doing it this time.

Chapter Notes

Start praying I get better at writing fight scenes now and maybe I'll be up to speed by GODDAMN THRILLER BARK. I promise I'm trying T-T.

This chapter has a brief allusions to genocide (in a weirdly misleading way???) soooo watch for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't pay a whole lot of attention to the fight as it's going on around me, but I do butt in to yell, "that guy fights dirty, for the record!" when Cabaji moves to take on Zoro. He just throws me a thumbs up over his shoulder.

The mayor takes my temporary distraction as an excuse to attempt escape with renewed vigour. "Hey! You wanna jostle the injured person? You keep tossing and you'll undo all your hard work!" The mayor just makes wordless grumbling in response.

The whole experience is not unlike the time I tried to ride a mechanical bull, but much less fun since I have a hole in my side and I'm sitting on top of an old man, and I'm not getting $20 for doing it this time.

It doesn't take long for Zoro to suddenly plop down next to me with a sigh. "You done with the unicycle guy already?" I prompt.

Zoro sets his swords to the side. “Yeah… the Captain can handle the clown.”

I nod. “Cool, cool. You wanna sit on this guy for me? I’m not actually very heavy.”

Said guy makes a very frustrated noise into the ground. I pat his head in sympathy, but that just seems to rile him up more.

“Yeah sure, scooch down.” Zoro parks his ass right on the mayor's back while I shuffle to sit on the pavement.

I gingerly stretch my side with a groan, “for an old-timer he sure is wily…”

“I am right here!” he grouses.

“You know Shanks?!” comes Luffy’s yell from where he’s fighting Buggy.

I turn to Zoro with a lazy grin. “What do you wanna bet he’s talking about Red-Haired Shanks, the Emperor?”

Zoro scoffs. “No shot he knows someone so famous. The Captain is good, but he’s not that good.”

My smile slides into a smirk. “You’d think, huh? So we on? Say… 1,500 berri?” He just reaches out a hand with a pitying shake of his head.

Poor sucker.

Luffy goes crashing through a building. “Poor sucker,” Zoro muses.

I turn back to him with an offended look. “So when he goes crashing through a whole fucking house he gets up *fine,* but when I smack into one it debilitates me?”

Zoro just shrugs, “I don’t think you should use Luffy as any kind of example, he’s fucking ridiculous even by my standards.”

I roll my eyes at him. “If you had been the one stabbed you would have taken a 30 minute power nap and gotten up fine.”

He shrugs one shoulder and scratches at his neck. “Maybe. I’m also a little bit ridiculous, by normal people's standards.”

“No shit…” I murmur. We look out upon the fight impassively.

“Yaknow,” I start conversationally, “I really wanted to join a circus when I was younger, but I’m starting to think it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Zoro raises an amused eyebrow. “Really?”

I nod. “Yup, wanted to juggle professionally.”

Zoro’s scoff is drowned out by Luffy screaming, “you bastard!” We turn to see him holding his straw hat, now sporting a new nick in the brim.

“Uh oh.”

Luffy stands, shaking in rage. “No one damages my lucky hat and walks away from it alive!” Luffy furiously whips his head forward. “This hat is my treasure! Anyone who so much as lays a finger on it is gonna pay!”

Then Buggy does the stupidest thing to ever be done *ever*. He stabs the hat.

I immediately flatten myself to the ground. “Zoro, hit the deck, it’s about to get nuclear out here.”

He snorts. “The kickback from that isn’t gonna reach all the way over here.”

I squint at him. “Obviously. I was being *funny* . It was *humour*. Don’t know if you’ve heard of it.” He sticks his tongue out at me. I do the same.

I tune back into the combatant’s conversation to hear, “yeah, we were apprentices on the same ship!”

I shoot a bewildered look at Zoro. “The implications of that are fucking mental.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Are they?”

I nod fiercely. “That means this goddamn idiot sailed on the *Oro Jackson*. Like the *King of the Pirates ship*.”

Zoro chokes on air. “Please tell me that’s more of your terrible humour.”

“Nope!” I say, popping the P.

The rest of the fight is a little boring to be honest. Me and Zoro watch the idiocy, and the mayor remains blissfully silent and unsquirming under Zoro's weight.

We get to see Luffy nail a sandal clad foot into Buggy's junk, so today hasn't been a total waste. Buggy then goes on a long storytelling rant about how he got his Devil Fruit by being fucking stupid and Shanks being hilarious.

Then his upper half lunges for Nami and the bag of treasure she's sneaking around with. I wave Luffy's attention to myself and mouth to him, 'kick his balls.' He gives me a bring grin, winds back his leg and once again cracks his sandal into Buggy's crotch.

I love this guy.

"I think the 'D' in his name stands for Dick Kicker," I tell Zoro.

He smirks at me. "What's yours mean then?"

I finger gun at him. "Detective!" He snorts.

Luffy tells Nami to drop the treasure to which she scoffs. "No! Drop the money and go? No way, why should I leave my treasure behind?!"

Zoro turns to me. "Should we be worried about her hangups about money and stuff if she's gonna be joining us?"

I dismissively wave a hand. "Problem for later."

The three of them chase each other around for a while, and eventually Luffy manages to hit Buggy so hard he flies clean across the island.

“Ok, you can let him up now,” I tell Zoro, who rolls off the mayor with a shrug. I think I hear a couple bones cracking… “Also please help me up.”

He heaves this long world weary sigh and I almost feel bad for the amount of shit he’ll go through. But then he hauls me up so fast I almost topple right back to the ground and I silently resolve to make his entire life much harder than it has to be.

When the three of us get over to Luffy and Nami, she’s giving him the map of the Grand Line. “Does this mean you’ll join our crew now?!” Luffy asks with stars in his eyes.

“I told you I’m never joining a pirate crew! But okay. Staying with you seems profitable enough,” Nami smirks, “just remember this, I’m only joining you because it’s in my interest!”

Luffy just grins at her. “Sure!” Then he turns to us with his big smile. “Ok, we’re leaving now! Got the map and got a navigator!”

“Alright, if you say so Captain,” Zoro agrees.

The mayor just sighs and rubs the back of his neck. “I guess I have to thank you youngsters. Probably couldn’t have gotten rid of that Buggy bastard without you…”

Luffy laughs. “Shishishi, don’t worry about it! I just wanted to beat the guy up!”

I give the mayor a bland smile. “He’s a very simple guy.”

“Hey! Are you outsiders?” comes a call from the veritable horde of townspeople that for some reason none of us noticed approaching.

The mayor pushes to the front of our group with a hand up. “Don’t worry! They got rid of the pirates!”

The mayor and his people reunite and exchange a few words while Luffy turns to us and jerks a thumb in the direction of our boat. Guess we're leaving then.

We leisurely walk through the destroyed streets to the docks, passing Chouchou and giving him nods on the way. When we get down there it's to two boats; the one we sailed in on and Nami's.

"This is your boat? It's great!" Luffy cheers.

Nami just shrugs. "It's alright. I stole it from some idiot pirates."

"That's a big mouth you got!" a familiar voice yells from inside it.

The three stooges me and Zoro rescued earlier pop up out of the boat. "Never thought you'd see us here huh?!"

Nami makes some nervous giggles and Luffy curiously tilts his head. "You know these guys?"

I butt in at this point. "She's not the only one." The three weirdos finally seem to take notice of Zoro and me. Knife guy lets out a high pitched shriek, grabs his buddies, and immediately books it into the town.

"Huh. Maybe I'm intimidating too?" I mutter, turning around to see the last vestiges of a harsh glare on Zoro's face. My expression falls flat. "Nevermind."

Nami hops on her boat and we plop back in our own, then we push out of port. "Hey, is that Buggy's mark on your sail?" Zoro asks.

“Well, this is his boat. I’ll get rid of it sometime,” Nami shrugs.

“Hey wait! Youngsters!” the mayor's yell sounds from shore. “Thanks! We’re in your debt!”

We all exchange smiles while Luffy laughs and yells back, “don’t worry about it! Take it easy!”

“Thanks for patching me up!” I holler. The mayor laughs and gives me a thumbs up.

Then Nami seems to notice the distinct lack of a treasure bag in our boat. “Did… did you leave the treasure back there?!”

Luffy smiles wide. “Yeah!”

Nami’s entire face twitches. “That was worth around 5 million berries, you idiot!”

Luffy’s face scrunches up. “But they need the money to fix the town, right?”

“That was *my* treasure! Do you know how hard I worked to steal it!” Nami tries to shove Luffy’s head underwater. Me and Zoro burst into laughter while they continue yelling at each other.

“She’s perfect,” I smirk at Zoro. He huffs out a laugh, then hands me a wad of paper. I look at him curiously then back at the stack.

Oh, shit.

“Dude?” my voice cracks.

He raises an eyebrow. “2,500 berri, as promised. You won our bets so it’s yours.” My eyes widen and I hug the cash to my chest. He furrows his brow at me. “Why do you look so surprised? Did you not think I was gonna hold up my end of the bargain?”

I let out a breathless chuckle and shake my head. “No, not that. It’s just… this is the first berri I’ve ever made, if you can believe it!” His face says he either doesn’t believe that at all or is flabbergasted as to why it’d be true.

In the grand scheme of things it’s a paltry sum. It’s chump change. Could buy me a meal, round of drinks, and not much more.

But something about actually having the currency of this world…

Feels good.

“Are you gonna cry over winning a bet?”

“No! Shut up!”

_____

“There’s no way we’ll make it to the Grand Line like this,” Nami announces.

I have to agree. “Coby was right, even with a navigator now we’re still severely understaffed.”

“Yeah, and we need more meat!” Luffy nods empathically.

“And booze,” Zoro adds.

“Shut up! Not what I meant!” Nami yells, upper body lunging across our two boats. “The Grand Line is crawling with pirates in search of the One Piece, and they all have ships that are way better than this!”

“And we don’t have a whole crew.” Luffy scratches his head, rocking back and forth on the bow of our dinghy.

Nami starts counting off her fingers, “no crew, no equipment, and barely a ship! There’s no way we’d survive.”

“Yeah, we need a cook. And a musician!” Luffy proclaims.

“A musician?” Zoro laughs.

I wag a finger in his face. “Hey man, don’t diss music. It’s super important on a pirate journey.” He just rolls his eyes.

Nami heaves a sigh. “A little to the south of here is a populated island. We might be able to get some supplies and a real ship there…”

Luffy throws his hands in the air enthusiastically. “Fresh meat at last!”

“Don’t forget the booze!” Zoro adds.

Nami's eyes bug out. “Is that all you think about?!”

I just shake my head and mumble. “You’d barely be able to legally drink where I’m from…”

Zoro gives me a curious look. “And where *are* you from exactly?”

My heart clenches and I avert my gaze. “Ah, that’s a little… complicated.” This seems to intrigue Nami, who leans across the ships, arms folded. I meet her gaze head on. “It’s not anywhere you’ll find on a map, and probably not anywhere I can ever return to.” Her eyes widen and I hear Zoro make an upset noise beside me.

There’s silence across the two boats as that sinks in. “Is that why you were crying when we first met?” Luffy asks from the bow, not turning his view from the ocean.

“Yeah…” I murmur, slumping down into the dinghy.

“Is it just really hard to find?” Nami questions, curiosity and a little bit of desperation in her tone. “Or was it destroyed? Like a Buster Call—”

“Nami,” Luffy interrupts, an edge in his voice I am entirely unaccustomed to.

Nami jumps a bit and Zoro tenses up beside me. “Sorry…” she mutters.

I force my face into an easy smile. “Nah, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to bring the mood down! Where are we headed again? Uh, Gecko Islands?”

The look Nami gives me says she knows damn well what I’m doing. “Yeah. That should be the closest.”

I nod, “Cool, cool.”

There’s another long moment of silence. “Ok. Zoro, I’m gonna nap on your man tiddies now.”

“You’re gonna what on my *what?”*

_____

I actually *do* end up napping on Zoro’s chest, out of what I assume is pity. Eh, worth it. Those things are fucken comfortable.

I jolt awake what I think is a few hours later. The sky is dark and there’s only the dull light of a hooded lantern on Nami’s ship that lets me look around for the source of my sudden consciousness.

I identify it as Nami herself quietly settling down near the bow of her ship, a guilty look shot in my direction as she registers she woke me.

I untangle myself from Luffy's rubber limbs, which had wound around both me and Zoro when he joined us at some point. I carefully, and very slowly so as to not take an untimely dip in the drink, hop ships to Nami’s slightly nicer boat.

“You mind?” I whisper, gesturing to the open space next to her. She gives me a small smile and nod. I gingerly slide to the floor, mindful of my side.

I am fucking amazed by how fine I feel for it not having been that long since I was slashed open.

“I’m sorry if I pushed too hard earlier,” Nami interrupts my inner dialogue.

I quietly scoff. “Oh please. I’m not gonna fault you for poking at my past, it’s much less interesting than you think.” She raises an eyebrow. “No seriously. My life was fucking boring until I met Luffy.”

The eyebrow lifts further. “You said you’re from an island that’s not on any map. I think that’s pretty spectacular.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that cool. Hell, it’s not even good at times. It had problems and issues out the wazoo and honestly… I feel horrible that I like it better here.” She looks at me with clear surprise written on her face. I meet it with a grimace of a smile. “Yaknow, I’m probably the only person in this world who knows anything about where I’m from. And still… I can’t help but hate it just a little.”

Nami is quiet for a second, then whispers more to the night than to me. “You don’t have to love everything about where you’re from. One good memory, one person, or one beautiful place. That’s all you have to love about it.”

I study her for a moment, wondering if I should say something. “It’s hard carrying an entire place on your back, huh?”

Fuck it we ball.

She lets pure horror light up her face for but a moment before it’s locked behind a mask of resigned amusement. “Am I that obvious?”

I just huff and shake my head. “When people speak from experience, I tend to listen. Plus, detective.”

Quiet once again reigns over the two ships, silent in the night. “How about this,” Nami starts, staring straight up, “I’ll tell you one thing I love about my home, and you tell me one you love about yours. That way we can both lighten each other's load just a little.”

“Sure,” I murmur into my knees with a smile.

“Ok… My favourite place in the world is a tangerine grove right outside my childhood house. I used to hide away in that grove for hours…” she lets out a wistful sigh. “Ok, your

turn.” I contemplate for a bit. Nami seems to take the prolonged non-response as judgement. “Or not, it’s ok if you don’t want to—”

“My favourite place,” I interrupt her, “was the pet store fish aisle.” I can see Nami’s face scrunch as she tries to keep it together, but a snort still slips out. “No, I’m serious. I spent so much time there the employees knew me by name. That’s not normal for pet stores where I’m from.”

“Why the hell did you go to a pet store to stare at fish?” she asks through muffled giggles.

I raise my eyebrows, still smiling. “Dude, I was landlocked my entire life, if I wanted to stare at fish this was the best option!”

She grins at me, incredulous. “Why would you even want to stare at fish?”

I laugh just a little too loud in the quiet. “I just *really* liked fish. I wanted to be a mermaid so bad when I was a kid.”

“I thought you wanted to join the circus?” comes Zoro’s voice from the other boat.

Both me and Nami shriek in surprise, waking our captain who mumbles out, “the meat man…” before promptly falling back to sleep. The three of us burst into uncontrollable wheezing.

“Fuck, my side!” I hiss between laughs, stab wound setting off sparklers in my nervous system.

I’m getting waaaay too attached to these lunatics.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Buggy out here having the worst day of his life. And it only gets worse from here for him :(But Ed is having the time of their life go bad bitch gooooo. Also trauma? Haven't heard of her. Is it some kind of spice???

Next up is Syrup Village which I'm real exited for heeheehhehehe

Chapter 8: Chapter Eight: I Lie, I Do It All The Time

Chapter Summary

Chop - Vundabar

“A detective?!” he shrieks, looking like I’ve just brought the Antichrist to his firstborn's baptism. “My natural enemy!” Oh, hadn’t even thought of that. Detectives are supposed to be bastions of truth or some shit… too bad I’m a lying liar who lies.

Chapter Notes

The length of this thing really got away from me, so longer chapter today.

(For reference I try to keep the chapters around 3k, this one is nearly 4k :P)

((Future edit from future me doing the Big Edit™ April 30th 2024, BESTIE REMEMBER WHEN YOU DIDN'T WRITE 4K+ EVERY CHAPTER? HOW NICE WAS THAT?))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We run ashore on the Gecko Islands a few hours after daybreak. “Wow! There’s really an island here!” Luffy marvels, amazed by the simple act of navigation.

“We followed the map, what’d you expect to happen?” Nami asks incredulously, shooting me a matching look.

“We got lost a lot,” I shrug. She just shakes her head in disbelief.

Luffy bounces along the beach, staring down the path cut in the hill. “Is there a village here?”

Nami nods, tucking away her map. “More like a small hamlet, but they should have everything we need.”

Luffy immediately starts cheering. “Meat! Meat! Meat!”

Zoro hops out of the dinghy and stretches. “Been forever since I last stood on solid ground!”

Luffy sticks his tongue out at Zoro and laughs. “It’s ‘cause you’re always sleeping!”

I shake my head. “It’s been less than 48 hours…”

It’s at this point I lock onto the shapes of three small kids and one scrawny teen crouched in the bushes. Wow they are… bad at that. Is that Usopp’s nose peeking through the bush?

“By the way, I just happened to notice… what the hell are those guys doing?” Zoro asks conversationally, popping a katana out of its sheath by an inch.

I roll my eyes. “I’m 90% sure those are kids, calm your pillowy chest.”

Zoro lets go of his sword to lunge at me, attempting to rock my shit. I, like the mature person I am, hide behind Nami. “Say that again you little shit!”

“DON'T RUN AWAY?!” comes the screaming voice of Usopp. I can just make out the heads of the three kids that follow him around running away at top speed, screaming all the while.

This is the part where I try to banish all thoughts of Maes Hughes and the voice they share.

Usopp stares at us like a deer in headlights for a minute before snapping into a shaking action pose and pointing at us dramatically. “I am the great pirate Captain Usopp, who’s in charge of

the security in this village! It's best if you don't try to attack, or my 80 thousand men are not going to forgive you!"

We all pause for a moment. "…You're lying, aren't you," Nami deadpans.

Usopp's eyes bug out. "HOW DID YOU KNOW?!"

Nami shoots me a sly grin. "You just admitted it yourself…"

"SHIT!" Usopp screams into his hands.

"He was lying?!" Luffy's jaw drops.

Usopp visibly scrambles before adopting this twitching false smug… thing. "I may have exaggerated the number… but I do have a great many men at my command!"

"You mean those three kids who ran away screaming?" I ask, leaning against Nami with a catty grin.

Usopp starts so hard he knocks himself off balance, arms pinwheeling and face white. "Are you psychic?!"

"Just a detective, nothing that fantastical," I lie out of my ass. Explaining that I'm from some kinda alternative reality where they're all fictional characters nonwithstanding, this guy's a fucking terrible liar.

"A detective?!" he shrieks, looking like I've just brought the Antichrist to his firstborn's baptism. "My natural enemy!" Oh, hadn't even thought of that. Detectives are supposed to be bastions of truth or some shit… too bad I'm a lying liar who lies.

“You’re neat!” Luffy laughs.

Usopp huffs and whips out his slingshot, taking aim right at Luffy. “Hey! Don’t insult me! I’m a proud man and I won’t stand for it! Last warning, or you’ll get to see why they call me ‘Proud Usopp!’” The smile slides from Luffy’s face, and he dips his head so the straw hat shades his eyes. “My slingshot skills are far greater than your average pistol!”

“At the very least he’s better than me…” I mumble to Nami, who stifles a laugh.

“Now that you’ve drawn your pistol, put your life on the line.” Luffy’s voice rings clear like a bell, a small smirk popping out from under his hat. “Guns aren’t for threats, they’re for actions. Are you willing to risk your life?”

I see Zoro smirk and pop open his katana again. “What you’re looking at are real pirates, consider your next move carefully.”

I slide to my Captain’s right and brush aside my flannel to reveal my pistol. “You should know, I’m a master of the quick draw. Wouldn’t even take a second for me to put a hole in that nose of yours,” I bluff, channeling my inner badass to give this poor fucker the hardest intimidating stare down of his life.

Usopp visibly struggles against our front, sweat pouring down his face in buckets. His face and posture crumple and he drops his ammo. He then dramatically falls to his knees and whimpers out, “good golly *fuck* you pirates are scary!”

Me, Luffy and Zoro exchange looks before bursting into laughter. “I stole that!” Luffy squeezes out. “From Shanks, a pirate I know!”

Usopp wheezes into the ground. “Red-Haired Shanks?! The *Emperor?!”*

Luffy just keeps laughing. “Yeah. Your dad’s Yasopp, right?” Usopp jolts forward with a huge smile, which then sends him skidding down the outcropping he’s perched on and

sprawling into the sand.

He bangs his head no less than two times and I silently remind myself to check his ass for a concussion later. He looks up dazed and blinks stupidly at Luffy. “Yeah, Yasopp is my dad… how do you know that?”

Luffy and I exchange looks, I click my teeth a couple times and his eyes light up. “I’ll tell you all about it, but first!”

_____

“Meat! Fresh meat!” Luffy cries, scarfing down on a slab the size of his head. After hearing our demands of ‘food and not much else’ Usopp led the lot of us to the restaurant we’re sat in now.

“It’s pretty good, huh?” Usopp boasts, like he had anything to do with the preparation of the food.

Luffy nods enthusiastically. “So I met your dad when I was a kid!”

Usopp raises his eyebrows with a grin. “So my old man really knows Shanks?”

While the two of them chat about that shit I turn to Zoro and his bizarre setup. “So do you normally sit your swords like they’re a paying customer when you go to a restaurant, or is this a new development?”

He gives me an amused smirk through a mouthful of rice. “What, you want their seat?”

I smirk back, leaning on folded hands. “Maybe I do.”

Nami glances back and forth between us like she's looking at a particularly ugly abstract painting. "What the hell is with you two?"

I swivel all of my attention to her, batting my eyelashes. "I'm sorry, Nami darling. I don't mean to deprive you of my attention!" She scoffs, but I see the smile she hides behind her hand.

"Anyways, maybe you can help us, Usopp!" she turns to him, dazzling smile turned up to a thousand watts. He seems complexity oblivious to the attempt at charm, so she rolls her eyes and continues. "Do you know someone who can set us up with a decent ship, or anyone who can sail?"

Usopp's face pinches in thought. "It's a pretty small village. Sorry, but I don't think we'll be able to help you!" His face melts into this… smug/nervous/sleazy *thing.*

"What about that place on the hill?" Zoro asks. Usopp goes stock still, eye twitching. "The mansion," he clarifies.

Nami claps her hands excitedly. "Do you know them?! With all that money surely they could help!"

"You stay away from there!" Usopp suddenly snaps. We all pause to stare at him, even Luffy stops chewing for a second to look. Then his brain catches up to his mouth and his face goes pale. "Haha! Just remembered something I had to do, gotta go bye! Eat as much as you want!" And then he runs out of the place like we set his hair on fire.

We blink at each other for a second before Luffy goes back to stuffing his face. "Weird…" Nami mutters.

I shrug, shovelling more fish in my mouth. "Not our problem 'till it's our problem."

We eat in peace for another ten minutes before Usopp's little friends burst in with a yell of, "the Usopp Pirates have arrived!" The owner remains completely unfazed. The kids scuttle up to our table screeching, "what'd you do with Captain Usopp?!"

Luffy, completely oblivious to that shit, rubs his distended stomach with a sigh. "That was delicious!" The kids recoil in horror as they connect dots that did not need connecting.

Me, Nami and Zoro all exchange looks, evil smiles creeping up our faces. "A little stringy for my taste, but what can you do?" I sigh dramatically.

Zoro leans forward, leering. "If you're looking for your Captain… We ate him."

"CANNIBALS!" they scream, promptly falling to the ground as we burst into laughter.

"Sorry, I'm sorry. I just missed fucking with kids," I say between chuckles.

"Little asshole," Nami grumbles at me.

"Anyways, your Captain flipped his lid after we brought up the mansion then left. My guess, he's tight with whoever lives there and doesn't want random weirdos he's just met screwing with them." The look of shock on the kids faces is making me want to press the envelope further… "The way he jumped to protect that place… makes me think he's got a sweetheart living up in that house."

The kids eyes bug out and the middle one screeches out "Witch! Pirate witch who can read minds!"

"Not a witch, just a detective," I roll my eyes.

"Same thing with you…" Zoro mutters.

“Anywho, could you take us to the mansion maybe?”

The kids exchange looks before the one in the middle nods. “Ok, sure.”

_____

When we get outside of the mansion gates Luffy is marvelling at the size of it. “What’s he come here for?”

“He comes to lie!” one of the kids tells us cheerfully.

“That horrible!” Nami cries.

“He’s not a bad guy! He’s awesome!” they quickly reassure us.

“How is a liar awesome?” Zoro asks with a scoff. For some reason that felt targeted…

“The girl who lives here, Kaya, has had terrible depression that keeps her sick and in bed since her parents got sick and died a few years ago.” Leave it to kids to be blunt and straight to the point.

“Yeah depression is a bitch like that,” I add. Nami and Zoro shoot me concerned looks, which I ignore.

“She’s super rich, but she’s still so sad…”

“So our Captain tells her special made-up stories to make her laugh! He’s the best at telling lies!”

“What a nice guy!” Luffy exclaims.

“So his stories make her feel better?” Nami asks.

“Great! I think we should ask her for a ship after all!” Luffy yells, pumping a fist in the air.

“Getting in is impossible because of the guards at the gate.” The kids tell us.

Then I notice that Luffy has disappeared from my side. “I’ll go ask her!” his voice says from atop the gates.

He starts stretching to slingshot himself and we all pile on him yelling, “no no no!”

We go soaring through the sky and crash into the ground screaming right outside Kaya’s window.

“Fucken Christ, Luffy, a warning next time!” I grouse, rubbing my side. My side which I realize with a start barely hurts at all anymore. I file that away to analyze later.

“Sorry, Ed!” he laughs, scrambling to his feet to help me up.

“A — are you alright?” a girls voice calls from above us. Kaya is hanging out her window and staring at us in clear concern, while Usopp up in his tree flounders around.

“It’s ok! Don’t mind them, it happens all the time. They’re new recruits trying to join the Usopp Pirates!”

Luffy dusts off his hat and shakes his head. “Nah, I’m here to ask a favour!”

Kaya blinks in surprise. “A favour from me?”

“Yeah! I was wondering if there was any way you could help us get a boat—”

“You, there!” Luffy is cut off. Rounding the corner with a glare is the asshole of the hour, the bastard butler, the caustic cat man, the… that’s all I got.

“What are you doing here?” he questions, striding up to us.

“Klahadore…” Kaya mutters.

“Get out. You’re trespassing,” he spits out, doing his weird glasses adjusting thing.

We just kinda stare at each other for a second before Luffy tilts his head. “Who’s this guy?”

“Actually Klahadore, these people are—”

“Not now Kaya,” the dickbag interrupts, “you can tell me all about these… people, after they leave.” He keeps stalking towards us. “Now out, all of you. Unless you have some business with me.”

“Ok! Can you help us get a ship?” Luffy asks optimistically.

Klahadore sticks his nose up. “Certainly not!”

He deflates and Zoro pats his back.

Klahadore's eyes lock onto where Usopp is attempting to hide. "Usopp! I've heard all about you… you're very well known in the village."

Usopp freezes before nervously turning his head back. "Yeah?"

The butler smirks. "I hear you've been on many an adventure, quite impressive for someone as young as you."

Usopp flashes him a shaky smile. "You can call me Captain Usopp!"

Klahadore scoffs. "Captain, huh? Your father had something of a reputation as well."

Usopp jerks forward. "What?"

Kaya leans further out the window, eyes wide. "Klahadore, please stop!"

"You'll never be more than the son of a filthy pirate! Who knows what trouble you're up to now, so I ask that you leave the lady of the house out of your business!" God this guy is such an asshole!

"Filthy pirate…" Usopp mutters.

Klahadore stares down his nose at Usopp condescendingly. "You and her are from completely different worlds and you know it! Is it money you're after? How much do you want?"

Kaya's face hardens for the first time since we've seen her. "That's enough Klahadore! Apologize to Usopp!"

"Hey! Be careful Kaya!" Usopp says with concern colouring his tone.

Klahadore's expression doesn't budge an inch. "What reason do I have to apologize to this savage man, my lady?" This guy ticks me off so fucking bad… "I'm merely stating the truth. I sympathize with you, really. You must hate your great idiot of a father for abandoning his family and village because of his mindless lust for treasure!"

"Klahadore stop!" Kaya shouts.

Usopp jumps down from the tree, using a grappling hook that comes out of his waist bag (which somehow works?) to slow his descent. He lands on the ground furious. I can see him gearing up to yell and fight so I step right into Klahadore's view.

"That's enough. You heard the lady, shut your fucking mouth," I spit.

"And who might you be?" he asks, clear disdain written all over his face.

"E. D. Domino, detective *and* filthy pirate. You say another word out of line, I swear to god you'll have more to worry about then that girl's reprimand," I growl, pushing Usopp back just a bit.

His face twists in what I think is amusement. "Is that a threat?"

I can hear Nami behind me whispering, "what the hell are they doing?!"

I square my stance and lift my chin. "No sir. When I'm threatening you, you'll know." I tap my chin in exaggerated thought. "Say, I might just be losing what's left of my marbles, but you look a bit familiar…"

Am I poking the hornet's nest? Absolutely. Am I going to stop? Hell fucking no. This guy is a huge asshole and I feel nothing but satisfaction.

His face twists up in a snarl. “I think it’s best you leave now.”

I glare down my nose at him. “I have to agree. We’ll see ourselves out. Oh, and in the future you should take care to listen to your employer. Cutting off a young lady is reprehensible behaviour.”

I spin on my heel, grabbing tight onto Usopp’s arm, and start my march to the front gates. I hear the rest of my companions fall in behind me while I walk. Luffy saddles up right next to me. “That was pretty cool. I wanted to hit him.”

I laugh quietly. “Maybe hold that thought until we leave the premises. I might still turn around to clock that son of a bitch.”

Luffy giggles and Nami lets out this choked noise behind me. “Please don’t go around punching butlers…”

“Nah, I think we should go back and stab the guy,” Zoro suggests from where he’s behind me. Once we get outside the gates and past the guards, whom I politely stick my tongue out at, Usopp rips his arm out of my hand.

“I should say thank you for standing up for me, but… I’m proud my father was a pirate, and a Brave Warrior of the Sea! And — and that’s not something I have to be ashamed of!” he yells, then turns and runs full tilt down the road away from us.

“I’m gonna chase that guy!” Luffy calls with a grin, bounding after Usopp and waving.

“Wait, Luffy!” Nami yells in vain.

“Yeah, he’s gone,” Zoro mutters. We walk for a while more, before eventually settling down against a fence.

“Real talk guys, I’m 90% sure that fucker is a dead pirate Captain.” My statement is met with noises of shock and disbelief.

“How the hell do you figure *that?”* Nami ogles.

“Right, so there was this pretty well known pirate Captain a few years back. His ass got gotten by the Marines, ironically I think it was Captain Morgan who took him in… Anyways he got executed,” I explain.

Nami raises an eyebrow, “So why do you think this random butler is some dead pirate Captain?”

I roll my eyes. “Because I’ve seen his bounty poster. You probably have too, like three-ish years ago?” I look to Zoro.

He scratches his head. “Maybe? What’s this guy's name?”

“Captain Kuro. He was famous for these weird knife gloves he called cat claws. Real weirdo,” I offer.

He smacks a fist into his hand. “Oh yeah, I remember that guy. Are you sure? How the hell would he have faked his own execution? And why would he come *here?”*

I twirl a strand of my hair. “Actually I have a theory about that, his First Mate was some kind of hypnotist. He could have just had him oogly boogly the Marines into thinking any random chump was him.”

Zoe shakes his head. Nami pipes up, “there’s still no motive. Why would he come here of all places?”

I shrug. “Probably for Kaya’s fortune, or chose a really weird retirement plan.” I turn to the kids. “Any input? When did this fucker get here?”

One kid, Carrot I think his name was? tilts his head. “About three years ago… he showed up on Miss Kaya’s doorstep saying he had been left for dead by the ship he was on. Her parents took him in as a butler.”

I snap my fingers and smirk. “So he fakes his death, jumps ship, washes ashore on the first place he comes across, finds the first rich people who will take pity on him and slithers into their good graces. Her parents died not too long after he got here, right?” The absolute horror on the kids' faces is kind of making me feel bad for pointing this out. “I’m just saying—”

Nami waves her hands, a grimace on her face. “Stop, stop! Your weird theory is done now.”

Zoro scoffs. “I’ll believe it when I see proof.”

I smirk at him. “Would you like to make a bet on it? Say… 2,000 berri?”

He squints at me for a moment. “Fine. Deal.” He reaches out for a fist bump which I return with glee. This is *fun.*

Can't call it a gambling addiction if I’m doing it with guaranteed success.

Nami gives me a nod of respect that I return gracefully. Scamming men is something bad bitches have in common. I can feel the start of a beautiful friendship on the horizon…

“So, is this something we should tell Luffy and your — uh… Captain Usopp? Where are they anyways?” Nami asks, head on a swivel as if they could be anywhere within half a mile

without us knowing.

“He probably went to his secret spot, by the shore,” the kids tell us, “he always goes there when he wants to think. Should we go look for him?”

“Huh? Nah, don’t bother,” Zoro lazily responds.

Nami rolls her eyes. “Luffy will be fine, and we don’t need to bother your Captain with this yet. But where’s your other friend?”

“Oh, Onion? He just up and disappears all the time, then shows up all freaked out.”

It’s on that cue that the third kid comes screaming and crying up the road. Wait, no, that’s just sweat. A lot of it. He skids to a stop in front of us, huffing and puffing. “Some nut job is coming here and he only walks backwards!”

The kids glare at him and in unison shout, “liar!”

He shakes his head. “No, really! Look!”

We all look down the road where an ominous figure approaches. And by that I mean a guy in a fedora, heart sunglasses, false beard, and leg warmers comes moonwalking right for us.

What kind of drugs was Oda on when making this monstrosity up?

“Fucken weirdo,” both me and Zoro mutter at the same time.

“Which one of you called me weird? I’m just a normal guy!” the weirdo announces, coming to a jazzy stop in front of us. What LSD fueled PTSD fit did this fucker walk out of?

Nami cringes back from him. “You look insane.”

He strikes a pose in response. “No! I’m a normal run of the mill hypnotist!” I throw a look at Zoro, who averts his eyes. Poor baby doesn’t know when to quit.

“Show us something!” the kids yell.

“What?! No! You think I’d just show my secret techniques to a bunch of strangers?” he shouts, shuffling through dramatic poses. Then pulls out his chakram and starts swinging it in front of the kids. “Alright. Watch this ring closely.”

“What a ham,” Zoro scoffs.

“On the count of three you’ll feel sleepy. One, two, Jango!” He does successfully make the kids fall asleep, at the cost of he himself passing out on the ground too. God this guy is weird.

“Who is this freaky weirdo?!” Zoro squawks. I just kinda… kick him. In the leg, gently.

He startles awake with a snort. “Wha? Yes! Normal run of the mill hypnotist!”

“…Dude.”

“Do you have somewhere you need to be?” Nami asks impatiently.

Jango’s eyebrows fly into his hairline. “Shit! I need to go!” He then proceeds to do what I can only call a speed walking version of the moonwalk, which was not something I thought I’d see in my lifetime, down the road away from us.

I turn to Zoro with a shit eating grin. “…and that was his First Mate.”

His face pinches and he looks away from me again, sweat dripping down his face. “…still not buying it.”

I roll my eyes. “If his First Mate is in town and these kids don’t recognize him, he’s probably moving forward with whatever his plan is. If it’s some kind of attack, they’re most likely to land on the north shore, where we did.”

“Either way, what do you want to do about it?” Nami asks, shaking the kids awake.

I hum. “I think I’m gonna go try and talk to Miss Kaya. Convince her that something is wrong.” I hop off my perch on the fence.

“And if she doesn’t believe you or, god forbid, you’re wrong?” Zoro questions.

I look over my shoulder at him. “Easy. I make her believe me.”

Chapter End Notes

Did I just canonize that this takes place in the anime's English dub? Maybe, maybe not.

In other news I bought a small anime sword and it's now the coolest thing I own. Three guesses as to who's sword it is lmao

Chapter 9: Chapter Nine: C’est P’t’être La Dernière Fois

Chapter Summary

Dommage - Bigflo & Oli

Her home is opulently decorated, this shit looks straight out of Ouran High School Host Club. I make sure to stick very close to Kaya so I don’t bump into any priceless vases. Also to keep her upright. That too.

Chapter Notes

Any other Canadian babes remember this song from French class? No? Alright.

Also my ass keeps making these innocuous and obscure statements in the fic that are completely foreshadowing and no one is ever going to pick up on them but I want you to know they're there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sneaking back into Kaya’s mansion is nothing short of a bitch. I spend like ten minutes just dicking around to find the block of hedge Usopp uses to get in and out, and when I finally find it my fucking hair gets caught in the branches.

I am also very bad at climbing trees. So that takes me a while. It’s funny since I actually have pretty damn good balance when I’m not tripping all over myself, nature just hates me.

It’s well past dusk as I toss a pebble I snatched from the ground at Kaya’s window frame, not the glass because I’m not an idiot. She swings it open with a surprising amount of force for a sickly girl.

“Usopp, you — ! …You’re not Usopp?” she stutters out, confused.

I'm just clinging to my branch like the whole tree will come down if I shift wrong. "Hey, hi. It's me again. Quick ask, how long until the assman comes to check on you again?" She makes a shocked snort then immediately covers her mouth in embarrassment. "No, please laugh. I'm funny on purpose," I grin at her. She lets out another giggle. "Really though, when's clod-hadore coming by next?"

She hesitates for a second. "Shouldn't be for quite a few hours… why?" I immediately scramble across the branch with all the grace of a newborn fawn, only *almost* falling out of the tree as I tumble into Kaya's room.

"I forgot how bad I was at that!" I huff, rolling off her bed and dusting myself off. I turn to the bewildered girl with a smile. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced, Miss Kaya! I'm E. D. Domino, please just call me Ed."

"Ah, yes, I remember you from earlier. Please just call me Kaya!" she shyly smiles. "Can I ask… why are you here?"

My face drops into a grimace and her smile dims. "Yeah… you might wanna sit down."

She tentatively does take a seat on her bed, wringing her hands and nibbling on her lip. "Honey, you aren't gonna like this, or want to hear it but…" I struggle to find the words.

"…But?" she prompts.

I bite the bullet and blurt it out. "So Klahadore is definitely not who you think he is, and absolutely wants to kill you."

That shocks her into an upright position so fast I swear I hear her spine protest. "Excuse me?! Please don't say such hurtful things…"

"Kaya, that man's real identity is Captain Kuro. The Man Of A Thousand Plans, and Captain of the Black Cat Pirates. He faked his death three years ago. I'm preeetty sure he's trying to

steal your fortune."

"Stop! Klahadore isn't — he isn't like that!" she denies, shaking her head and tightening her fists. Guess it's gonna be the hard way. "He's been taking care of me for years, he would never—"

"Never what? Lie to you? Hurt you?" I press.

Her hands are white as the sheets she's clenching. "No! He's a good man, he isn't—"

"Don't be naive!" I snap. If it's a wake up call this girl needs, it's a wake up call she'll fucking get. "Even if he wasn't a pirate trying to steal your fortune, which he *is* , he's still a lying asshole!" I start pacing in circles, taking care to keep my distance from her bed so she won't get more jumpy.

"Let me lay it out. He constantly interrupts you, undermines your authority, makes important decisions without you while telling you it's what's best, probably invokes the memory of your parents while doing it. Classic signs of a manipulative asshole! I should know, a fair few have tried to date me…" I trail off.

You'd think after the first three guys I turned down they'd get the memo, but nope. And it's not even that I don't like men! Because I do! Anyways.

"That's — how did you..?" Her voice is uncertain and I can see on her face something in there got through. Now I just need to press the right angle.

"Is he constantly using the 'your parents asked me to take care of you so you have to listen to me' card?"

Her face morphs into open shock before crumpling. "But — but — this whole time… He — !" I can see tears building in her eyes and goddamn nothing makes the high of victory sting quite like a young lady crying.

I soften my face. “Kaya, I’m sorry.”

Her face pinches as she presses her hands to her face. “Please don’t apologize… I just feel so stupid! In retrospect it — it’s quite obvious something was wrong…” She jumps up from her bed, only swaying a little on her feet. “I want to ask him about this directly!”

I rush forward to balance her. “Whoa whoa whoa, I’m not sure that’s such a great idea?” I really don’t want him to shank her ass… not to mention he would probably kill me without a second thought.

“I need to. If what you say is true… then he has a lot to answer for in regards to my parents.” The fire in this girl's eyes is actually a little scary, so I hook an arm through hers and help her out the door and down the hall.

Her home is opulently decorated, this shit looks straight out of Ouran High School Host Club. I make sure to stick very close to Kaya so I don’t bump into any priceless vases. Also to keep her upright. That too.

“Christ, you are *rich,”* I mumble.

She sighs. “I’ve never really cared about the money, even with everything I own and could pay for, I couldn’t save my parents…” Shit I forgot she was like super depressed.

“Sometimes there’s just nothing you can do to help. Especially when it comes to parents.” I try not to let bitterness infect my tone, but by the look on Kaya's face, I fail.

She hesitates for a second. “Are they…”

I shake my head. “Oh they’re still kicking, last I checked. I just ruined their marriage. It happens.”

Her eyes widen and the hand she's clutching onto my arm tightens. "I'm sure that isn't—"

She cuts herself off when we hear the low rumble of conversation in the room we're outside of. We pause right next to the door.

I can faintly make out Merry's voice with short clipped responses from Klahadore. And suddenly I'm reminded that Merry gets fucking stabbed at some point in this part of the story. Shit.

I tuck Kaya behind me and pull my pistol out of my waistband. Even if I can't shoot the damn thing for shit, having it as a threat is still worth the effort. I lean back and whisper to her, "no matter what, stay behind me and do *not* draw attention to yourself."

She gives me a meek nod. I try for a reassuring smile, but then we hear the crunch of glass and metal from inside, followed by Merry's shout of shock. "Klahadore, what are you doing to Miss Kaya's present!?"

I press my ear to the door to listen better, Kaya following close behind. "Oh I'll be receiving a gift alright, but it won't be glasses. It'll be her entire estate!" comes the shitstains acerbic response. "Guess there's no reason to carry on the act. In a few hours the village will be mourning an unforeseen tragedy…" I can hear the tell-tale clink of blades as Merry makes more noises of shock.

Merry's shout of, "Miss you have to run — !" is drowned out as I push Kaya back from the door to wretch it open, pistol pointed straight ahead of me.

From the door I can see Merry's cowering back and the dark shape of Klahadore lunging forward, claw-like blades poised for a devastating attack.

I don't even think. I just pull the trigger.

Two bullets left.

In the split second it takes for my bullet to travel toward Klahadore, for once looking like it will actually hit its mark, I see his strike divert to block its path. “The hell?” he growls, following the origin of the strike to us.

“Evening, you cantankerous bitch,” I intone, expression flat and gun still levelled at the human refuse.

“So it seems you really *did* have me figured out,” he snarls, glare sharp and menacing. Merry starts scrambling back behind me as I step into the room.

“That detective title isn’t just for show,” I smirk.

He looks past me to Kaya. “I don’t suppose that conversation slipped past your ears, my lady?”

Kaya’s quiet shaking voice is crystal clear in the otherwise silent room. “So it’s true? You really are a pirate Captain here for my fortune?”

Klahadore’s eyes flash. “Wow, you really do know your stuff. I’d congratulate you on a case well solved, but I’m afraid you won’t be leaving this place alive.”

Man I really wanna shoot that smug look off his face… When did I get so trigger happy?

Klahadore adjusts his glasses with an open palm. “Truly, it’s a shame and a waste. This could have all gone so much smoother if it went according to plan.” His face twists into a rotten smirk. “Wonderful, then, that I always have a backup.”

Oh god it’s time for the witty villain back and forth. I don’t know if I have enough comebacks for this…

“I wouldn’t count us out yet. As you saw I’m quite a good shot with this thing,” lying out my ass will have to do, “and in regards to your pathetic invasion attempt, we already have a capable team on the north shore ready to meet them.”

The smirk falls off his face, furious scowl taking its place. “Ah. So you know about that as well. Are you sure your… ‘capable team’ is enough to take on my entire crew?”

I scoff. “Yeah, your crew, which is probably a bunch of nobodies riding on your coattails? Please. Without you there to back them up, they’re useless.”

Scamming this asshole into thinking there’s a bigger fight is literally my only shot at getting out of this with the three of us still in one piece, pardon the pun.

His face pinches. “Be that as it may…”

I cut him off with another scoff. “If you’re counting on that hypnotist idiot you’ve already lost. I’ve seen my Captain bite through knives. His chakrams may as well be *bagels.”*

All of the colour flees Klahadore’s face. I see his body language shift, indicating his intent to make one last desperate attack before running.

I fire my pistol at him. I miss wildly.

One bullet left.

It is however enough to make him flinch back, one last resentful glare shot at me before he’s jumping out the window with a crash.

I wait two beats before deflating with a huge sigh. I turn around to see Merry holding onto Kaya, both of them cowering in the doorway. “Well fuck, did *not* think that would get his ass to back off.”

Merry makes a strangled choking sound and Kaya hesitantly steps towards me. “What — what now?”

I sigh again, tucking my single shot pistol back into my waistband. “I’m gonna go to the north shore and make sure everything is going smoothly, honestly I was kinda bluffing about knowing if my crew’s there. Knowing my idiots they might have gone to the wrong shore…”

I turn back to the pair. “Kaya, stay with Merry. And try not to do anything too stupid, please?” With nods from the two of them I start off down the hall to leave.

“Wait how the hell do I get out of here, this place is huge!”

———

After a quick and stress-filled jog through Syrup Village, only getting lost *once* thank you very much, I make it to the north beach. I arrive to… a sight.

There’s a pile of oil soaked pirates at the bottom of the slope, a slicked up slight bloody Zoro huffing over two cat themed weirdos, Luffy swinging Jango around by his ankles, and Nami and a bruised and bloody Usopp at the top of the hill looking bewildered.

“What the fuck did I miss?” I announce, looking around confused.

Nami grins, pulling me into a brief side hug when I trot up to them. “It’s been a really weird morning. We got here early, poured some oil down the hill and tricked the pirates, that hypnotist guy tricked Luffy so he’s letting out some frustration on him, it just keeps getting worse.”

“Why does Usopp look like he crawled out of a slasher film?” I ask, licking my thumb and leaning around Nami to wipe some of the blood off his face.

He doesn’t move away and his nose scrunches. “I fought some guys. Poorly.”

Did I just do the mom thing? When kids have shit on their face?? To Usopp???

Damn dying really changed me.

Nami makes a disagreeing sound. “You didn’t do *that* bad, it was actually pretty brave…”

Usopp’s face goes bright red under my palm. “That's why they call me ‘Usopp The Brave’!”

I pat his cheek and take my hand back. “Right. Anything else?”

Nami sounds a long suffering groan. “Ed, I'm so thankful for you telling us the pirates would be coming from this shore. Even so, it was only me, Luffy and Usopp for the first half of the fight!”

Usopp pipes up from Nami’s other side, “Zoro was late because he got lost and went to the wrong hill.”

“Shut up!” said lunatic growls as he stomps over to us, wiping excess oil off his… everything.

“Why are you so… shiny?” I inquire. He mumbles something I can’t quite make out. “What was that?”

“I slipped and fell!” he snaps.

I blink at him. “How many times? Twenty?” His wonderful squawking noises make a triumphant return.

Then Jango comes slamming into the cliff face near us as Luffy tosses him. “Woohoo! Ed! Ed! Did you see?!” he hollers.

I send him an enthusiastic thumbs up. “Great job, baby! Keep it up!”

Nami rolls her eyes and turns back to me. “Where have you been this whole time?”

I groan, rubbing a hand down my face. “Fuuuuuck, I have had such a — ok. I have never been to this island before. That was the first time I had been in that girl's house. I felt like *Zoro* up in this bitch, with how much I was getting lost!”

Zoro makes an offended noise that’s drowned out by Nami and Usopp’s laughter. “Anyways, I convinced Kaya shit was up, stopped Merry from getting fucking murdered by the assman, then came here.”

“Murdered?”

“Assman?”

“Speaking of the assman, where the hell is he? He ran off before I left, so how did I get here first?” I ask, looking around for the fucker.

“Simple. I was in no rush,” the fucker in question’s voice replies from behind me. I squeak and scramble away from that before turning around. Klahadore is stood tall, one clawed hand poised and pushing up his glasses.

“However, it has been quite a while since dawn,” he glares down at his subordinates, “so I have to ask… WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?!” And now he’s screaming. Wonderful. It’s way too damn early for his shit.

“B — but sir, you said letting the kid go wouldn’t cause any problems..?” Jango stutters out from where he’s half embedded in the wall, legs twitching.

Klahadore scoffs. “Yes, I did say that. What’s your point? He’s an idiot who I knew no one would believe.”

He shifts his glare to me. “The real problem was this one. Somehow, after only being on the island for *less than 24 hours* and meeting the both of us *once,* they figured the whole thing out.” The glare swivels back to Jango, who’s finally pulled himself from the wall. “Even then, I hadn’t accounted for you guy’s inexcusable weakness!”

Jango fumbles for a response, but it actually comes from the downed cat guys. “You’re calling us weak?!”

The two of them start ranting and raving as Klahadore or whatever he wants to be called stares on impassively. “Your point?”

“You’ve done nothing these past three years! There's no way you could beat the Meowban Brothers now!”

With that the pair of them, scratched and bruised and bloody from fighting Zoro, shoot past the lot of us to charge right at Klahadore. Jango makes an exclamation of shock as Klahadore literally disappears for a second, reappearing behind them, then disappears again.

“Pussyfoot Maneuver!” Jango cries in terror. I can’t hold in my snort. Jango whips his head around to me, eyebrows flying high over his cracked sunglasses. “You dare make fun of our Captain's terrifying technique?!”

I raise a disbelieving eyebrow. “I do when it sounds *that* stupid!”

Oh right, I remember this shit now. It’s a bastardized, off-brand, shittier version of Shave, one of the Six Powers CP9 used… how the hell did this Warrior Cats reject learn it?

“After three years it seems I've become quite generous,” he announces, appearing between the cat guys, a blade at each of their throats. “I give you five minutes. If you can’t settle this in five minutes… I’ll kill all of you myself!”

There's cries of shock and fear from his crew, and I note with just a little bit of pity none of them seem surprised he would take this course of action. The Meowban Brothers, bruised and shaking (whether from their injuries or plain ol’ fear), turn back to the group of us.

Zoro steps out from the congregation to stand alone, swords drawn, to face them. With a show of power that is frankly overkill for how much he's already demolished these suckers, Zoro downs the brothers with one single move.

“I won’t need five minutes.” For how much he claims to be indifferent, he sure has a dramatic streak in him. If I had any more of a death wish I’d call him a theatre kid to his face.

This display seems to shock Jango into action. He whips out his chakrams once again, yelling to his crew in a hoarse voice, “I’ll get the straw hatted kid, you all take down the swordsman!” His strategy has really devolved to throwing fodder at him, huh?

“Klahadore! Stop it!” comes a scream from atop the hill. Stood proud at the apex is Kaya, Merry standing nervously behind her.

“Kaya? What are you doing here?!” Usopp questions.

“Kaya, what did I say when I left?!” I yell incredulously at her.

It's a testament to her iron guts that she barely flinches at that. “You said to stay with Merry, and I did!” she gestures to the shaking man behind her.

I smack my hand into my forehead. “I also said not to do anything stupid!”

She just laughs. “You said ‘not anything *too* stupid’! I believe this is just the right amount!” her smile dissolves into a furious glare as she switches her gaze to her former butler. “Klahadore. What you're doing and what you've taken from me… isn’t worth the money! If you want it so bad you can have it! Just leave the village!”

Both me and Usopp make squawking sounds.

“Kaya?!”

“Don’t give this asshat what he wants?!”

Klahadore finally turns to face her. “You’re wrong my lady. It’s not only the money I’m after. I want peace of mind.” He gets this creepy smile on his face. “Only when I’ve gotten peace and money will my plans be complete… that’s why the attack and your death are essential.”

Kaya’s face goes slack. Usopp starts yelling from beside me, “Kaya, run! It’s no use negotiating with this guy!”

Kaya’s expression turns stone cold as she pulls a pistol out of her jacket and levels it with both hands at Klahadore. “LEAVE THIS VILLAGE!” The authority in her voice, which is so different from the soft tone we heard earlier, is entirely dumbfounding to Usopp, who takes a deep breath beside me.

Klahadore lets out a soft chuckle. “You really have gotten stronger these past few years…”

I cut him off before he can begin his rant. “Ok, shut up now. Kaya, your kindness isn’t a weakness. But if you can’t pull that trigger, put the gun down.”

Tears start to drip down her hard face as her hands shake and tighten. “I — I…” For a second I think she might just shoot the man, but then she makes this frustrated noise and drops the gun.

I soften my eyes for her. “That’s fine.” I draw and point my own pistol at Klahadore. “You should know, I only have one bullet left. And I intend to use it,” I spare a fond look for my Captain, who while I was distracted once again put Jango in the dirt (after stabbing Nami, how did I miss that?), “after all, guns are for actions, not threats.”

Luffy’s laughter is loud among the chatter of the pirates. The glare Klahadore is sending at me could peel paint. “They call you the Man of a Thousand Plans, too bad I only need one.”

And I fire.

I miss.

Zero bullets left.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the first of many blunders that will come with using a gun...

But Ed out here making money moves. Also I just love the idea that the oil trap could have worked, it's so funny to me for no reason.

Chapter 10: Chapter Ten: I’m A Liar, Don’t Doubt My Sincerity

Chapter Summary

Creature Comfort - Arcade Fire

Me and the weight roll a few times through the dirt and down the hill. We come to a stop, me staring right up into Usopp’s terrified bloody face. “HOLY CRAP THAT WAS SCARY!” he screams into my face.

Chapter Notes

I'm very fond of this chapter.

This week on Aachria does whack shit: Explosions and fire. And lots of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the split second between my bullet finding its end in the dirt and Klahadore’s realization that I’ve flubbed my shot, he's already launching forward to gut me like a fish. I silently resign myself to a second painful death.

“FUCK!” Usopp’s voice rings out right before I feel a heavy weight barrel into me, pushing me aside with barely a millimetre of clearance between my face and the strike.

“FUCK!” I respond right back.

Oh my god I fucked that so bad. I had a cool line and everything! What the hell is wrong with me?!

Me and the weight roll a few times through the dirt and down the hill. We come to a stop, me staring right up into Usopp’s terrified bloody face. “HOLY CRAP THAT WAS SCARY!” he screams into my face.

“AGREED!” I scream right back.

“I thought you were a master of the quick draw?! I can shoot better than that *blindfolded!”* he shouts, spit flying into my face.

My surprised look turns offended. “Being *quick* doesn’t mean I’m *good!* That’s the fourth time I’ve ever shot a gun! Besides, I WAS LYING ABOUT THAT!”

“WHAT?!” I spot something flying at us from the corner of my eye, so I tug Usopp down flat on top of myself as the body of Klahadore goes sailing over us, Luffy’s stretchy fist recoiling behind it.

“If you hate being shot at so much I’ll make sure to hit you a hundred times!” I make eye contact with his dazzling smile as he laughs loud and unabashedly cocky, “my fists are like pistols after all!”

Witty one-liners, you gotta love ‘em.

I turn my head so I can see where Klahadore landed, pushing Usopp’s curly hair out of my mouth. He’s just kind of standing there… menacingly. “Time’s up,” he announces, once again adjusting his broken glasses.

At least his depth perception is gonna be shit?

Then he starts swaying.

Aw fuckbuckets.

“Hey, Usopp?”

He turns to look at me, once again getting his wiry hair in my mouth. “Yeah?”

I spit it out. “However stupid it may look, that technique is going to rock our shit. Got any ideas?”

His eyes bug out. “Is it that bad?!”

I scrunch my nose. “Let's put it this way, he's not very good at… scaling it down. Or discriminating what it hits.” His lip starts wobbling and sweat drips down his nose onto my face. Ew.

The rhythmic clicking of Klahadore’s claws is still audible over the panicked hum of the Black Cat Pirates' pleas for help. Luffy stalks into view, planting himself firmly between the two of us and the clinking Klahadore.

“Luffy…” Usopp mutters.

I call out to my Captain, “Luf, be careful! And watch out for your hat!”

He tosses a grin over his shoulder. “Don’t worry! I’ve got this!”

The clinking comes to an abrupt stop. Klahadore mutters something under his breath and disappears. I had already known what to expect. But holy shit seeing the huge gouges and slashes appear in the rocks and people around us, including my Captain, is fucking terrifying.

And then the dumbest thing happens. Klahadore, going faster than the eye can track, Pussyfoots right into the oil. He doesn’t register his mistake at first, just raises a hand to attack or make another stupid proclamation.

Then sweet *sweet* karmic comeuppance. His feet fly out from under him. He makes a weird "HUAH—" noise that sounds like his lungs trying to exit his body through his mouth as he goes down.

There's a moment of silence across the battlefield. Which is broken by a snort from Kaya of all people. Me Usopp and Nami are quick to join her, as is the rest of the accompaniment, Luffy loudest of all. Even the Black Cat Pirates join in!

Klahadore furiously whips his head around at his subordinates. "Would you shut up!" he yells, but after his willingness to almost murder a good half of them, they don't seem as receptive to his anger. They just keep laughing.

His indignant and oil smeared face is almost enough to make up for him almost flaying me. Then a most beautiful thought enters my brain dome. I slowly turn to Usopp with a wicked grin. "Is that oil… flammable?"

Usopp's entire face lights up. "Yes. Yes it is." He pulls out his slingshot, braces an arm on my shoulder, and lets loose a pellet that explodes on impact. The entire swath of ground slicked in oil, including the pirates still standing in it, are set alight by bright orange flames.

There's some screaming, and a shout of fury from the on-fire Klahadore. I let out another disbelieving laugh. "I love it here…"

"Good god…" I hear Zoro mutter somewhere behind me, Nami humming her horrified yet impressed agreement nearby.

"YOU!" Klahadore howls, scrambling out of the fire looking like a demon escaping hell.

Me and Usopp whip our heads to each other and scream in unison, "WE ONLY MADE HIM COOLER!"

In a move straight out of Ghost Rider, Klahadore attempts the Out The Back Attack *while still on fire.* He leaves a sparking web of light as he bounces around the path, flaming streaks leaving claw marks.

Luffy stands strong through it all, from what I can see past Usopp's hair. He stays tall and unmovable even as smouldering slashes imprint on his rubber skin. "Captain…" I can hear someone murmur behind me.

A good portion of the fight is mostly a blur, with Usopp's near constant screaming and tendency to hunch over my head whenever something crazy happens most of my perception is from the yelling and screaming of the fight's participants.

I do hear a loud yell at some point proclaiming, "THEN FROM THE VERY BEGINNING YOU PLANNED TO KILL US ALL?!"

"What a bunch of fucking idiots…" I mumble into Usopp's shoulder. He makes a questioning noise. "He's been hitting them with attacks and saying he doesn't give a shit about them the whole fight. It's obvious he wanted them dead," I elaborate.

"Sometimes people don't want to see what's right in front of them," he replies.

"Jango! Hypnotize the girl and *kill her!"* Klahadore screams, still locked in combat with Luffy.

"This dude doesnt give up…" I mutter, turning to try and see where the man in question is. I spot his very beat up form struggling to his feet and gearing up to lunge at Kaya.

Merry jumps in front of her as Usopp yells above me, "Kaya! Run!" He tries to scramble off of me, but it's at this point I register the main reason he hadn't gotten off earlier. His ankle is definitely twisted at an unnatural angle.

Kaya gives the two of us a solemn nod, then grabs Merry's hand and takes off into the woods as fast as she can. "Shit!" Jango wheezes out, hobbling after her with significantly less pizazz than usual.

"Fuck!" I hiss out, jumping up myself and pulling Usopp with me. I crouch down. "Ok bitch get on!" Usopp makes some indignant noises, but climbs on anyway. "We've got Kaya! For the love of god someone put that cat bastard down!"

_____

Listen. I am no runner, I am no trackstar. *Especially* with a lanky teenager on my back. We're (and by we I mean me) running through the woods, following Jango's hollers and the path of destruction he cuts.

We follow the downed trees for a solid ten minutes, the shouts slowly petering out during that time. We reach a section of trees completely decimated from about three feet up.

With no other trail to follow I turn my head back to look at Usopp. "Any bright ideas, Brave Warrior of the Sea?"

He makes some frustrated noises on my back, "I don't know—"

He's cut off by Merry's voice yelling out, "I won't let you touch Miss Kaya!"

I start booking it in that direction. "I've got no free hands or bullets, so I'm basically your mobile turret right now. You've gotta shoot this fucker as soon as you see him," I instruct Usopp. He makes affirming sounds in response.

When we come up on the scene, it's to Jango preparing to hurl a chakram at a solitary Merry, no Kaya in sight. Usopp shoots a pellet above me, nailing him right in the back of the head. "Hey! Weirdo!" he calls, gearing up a second shot.

When Jango turns around to yell at us Usopp looses the pellet, which turns out to be some kind of pepper bomb, and it explodes all over his face. “Where’s Kaya?” I yell to Merry as Jango folds over hacking.

“We split up, I stayed behind to distract this man! The Usopp Pirates are with her now!” he yells back, scrambling away from Jango.

Me and Usopp both heave sighs of relief. “Great, then we just have to take down this chump.”

“Who — *cough* Who’re you c — *wheeze* calling a chump!” Jango grits out, eyes red and streaming.

“Put a sock in it, MJ reject!” I retort, letting Usopp slide down my back.

Jango does not put a sock in it. “Wh — Who do you think you — *hack* are?!”

I roll my eyes and don’t even bother replying. Usopp nails him in the nose with another pellet as I lean around him to call out to Merry, “which way did they go?” He points to his left so I take off cheering, “you got this!” over my shoulder.

I barely make it 200 feet before a screaming weight drops on me from on high while hollering “Take this creepy weirdo!” I scream and fall on my ass. I get smacked in the back by what I’m fairly certain is a frying pan and silently swear vengeance.

“Wait! Stop, it's Ed!” Kaya’s relieved voice rings out.

“Kaya?” I groan, shoving the weight off myself. The weight turns out to be Carrot, who scrambles back to join the other two kids. The three of them start babbling apologies.

I wave them off. “Don’t worry about it, you did a good job.” They beam with pride. I turn to Kaya. “Usopp is dealing with Jango, let's go back to where they are.” She nods, stepping toward me but fumbling.

I jump forward to catch her. “I’m sorry, I’m feeling a little faint…” she murmurs into my arm.

I reach up a hand to feel her forehead. “Shit Kaya, you’re burning up! We gotta get you to a doctor ASAP.”

She shakes her head. “No, please take me to Merry and Usopp.”

I hesitate, but sling her arm over my shoulder and start in the direction I came from. “Let me know if you don’t feel up to walking.”

She flashes me a grateful smile. “Thank you, but I’m fine.”

When we get back to the scene, Jango is on the ground and Usopp is helping Merry up. His face lights up when he sees Kaya.

God this boy is whipped.

“Usopp!” Kaya cries, running out of my arms toward him.

...And so is she.

It’s at that point that Jango springs up from his prone position, a chakram poised to slice Kaya’s throat clean open. I make a choked sound and lunge forward to grab her, but she’s already past my reach.

Then there's a loud bang and Jango crumples to the ground in a flash of light. As he falls he reveals Usopp behind him, sling shot still raised and a terrified look etched on his face.

"Shit, alright."

_____

We end up leaving Jango in the woods. Fuck that guy. On the walk back to the rest of the crew Usopp pipes up from my back, "can you guys keep everything that happened a secret?"

The kids burst into shocked outrage. "Why would we do that? The village has to know you were telling the truth!"

Kaya nods along from where she's being supported by Merry. "We have to fix their misunderstanding…"

I feel Usopp shake his head. "Misunderstanding? They call me the village liar because *I lie all the time*. Besides, why would pirates be interested in such a small village? So let's just say nothing happened." He lets out a small chuckle. "It was all just another of my lies."

I hike him further up my back with a laugh. "Very mature, Proud Usopp."

"I try," he says smugly. "I'm not gonna force you, of course," he throws out. The kids start shouting their compliance and reassurance.

I feel Usopp turn to look back. "Kaya. Will you tell?"

I can almost hear the smile in his voice. Kaya laughs quietly. "No."

_____

When me and Usopp get back to the shore the last of the Black Cat Pirates have already fled with their defeated Captain in tow. Kaya, Merry and the kids had split off from us, the kids into town and the other two back to their abode.

Zoro is laughing against the cliff wall, Nami is cradling her bag of treasure, and Luffy is laid out on the ground with a content smile resting on his face.

“Thanks, I wouldn’t have been able to protect the village without you guys!” Usopp laughs.

Zoro snorts in response. “Credit where credits due, if you hadn’t done anything I wouldn't have either.”

“Me neither,” Luffy pipes up.

“Who cares? I got me some treasure!” Nami giggles.

I shrug. “Eh. I do what I want. Sometimes you solve a case and a guy tries to kill you. Them's the breaks.” Zoro laughs and leans over to fist bump me, which I gladly return.

“In light of this there’s a decision I've made,” Usopp announces. The rest of the group looks at him in question, but I just close my eyes and smile.

_____

We find ourselves once again in the restaurant Usopp brought us to the first day here. Oh god, it’s been less than 48 hours since we got here. This endeavour has felt like a damn lifetime.

“Now that we’ve eaten we should probably get going,” Zoro announces.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Luffy hums, pulling a fishbone out of his throat. Me and Nami exchange exhausted looks.

“There you are!” Kaya’s voice calls from the door. The lady herself strolls up to our table with a big smile.

“Hey, Miss!” Luffy grins.

“Hi Kaya!” I wave.

“Are you alright to be up out of bed?” Nami asks.

She lets out a chuckle. “Yes. I’ve been sick ever since I lost my parents… but Usopp’s encouragement helped me start getting better.” She flashes a bright smile, “I can’t stay in bed forever, you know!” And she does look noticeably better today, her complexion is not nearly as pale as the day previous.

Me, Nami and Zoro all exchange smiles. “Getting out of bed is sometimes the hardest part,” I admit. “You should be proud of your progress.”

Kaya laughs softly. “You’ve all done so much for me, I can’t thank you enough,” she gives me an especially grateful look, “especially you. I don’t think I would have realized anything was wrong if you hadn’t stepped in.”

Why does this keep happening?

I shake my head. “You’re pretty tough, and you had other people looking out for you. I’m sure you would have been just fine.”

She just laughs. “Regardless, I recall hearing you all needed a ship!”

While we walk I tug on Kaya’s arm. She gives me a questioning look. “Just wondering, could I get your Transponder number?” I hear Zoro choke behind me, but ignore it.

Her eyebrows quirk and she gives me a small smile. “Yes of course, I’d love to stay in touch after you leave!” She rifles around in her pockets and produces a scrap of paper she scribbles on, then hands to me.

Collecting these as we go couldn’t hurt at all…

Kaya leads us down to the shore, chatting and laughing along the way, until we’re standing in front of a familiar ship.

Noises of awe come from all four of us. “You're giving this to us?!” Luffy cheers, waving his hands and jumping around.

“A real caravel!” Nami fawns.

Kaya giggles. “Yes, please use it!” I’m damn near tearing up at the sight of the ship.

“It’s a bit of an older model, but I personally designed it! A carvel-make caravel, with lateen sails and a central stern rudder. She's a fine ship, and her name’s the Going Merry!” Merry proudly explains.

Merry starts to explain the finer controls, which Nami takes him aside for. “What a cool ship! Especially the front, it's so awesome!” Luffy awes, staring up at her with stars in his eyes.

“She’s beautiful,” I choke out, fanning my eyes. Zoro shoots me a confused side-eye.

“I’ve loaded it with all the provisions you might need on a voyage,” Kaya tells us.

Luffy spins to her with a huge smile. “Thanks! It leaves nothing to beat tired!”

Zoro’s face drops into exasperation. “That’s ‘leaves nothing to be desired,’ you idiot.”

Kaya then turns to me with a grin. “I also prepared lots of ammunition for that pistol of yours, it's stored in the ladies cabin.” I blink my eyes in surprise. She blinks back before her face explodes in horror and she starts waving her hands. “But I don’t want you to think I’m forcing you to use the girls cabin! Or that the cabin is just for girls! Ah—”

I cut her off with a full belly laugh. “Man, Usopp really lucked out with you!” I wiggle my eyebrows, “almost as much as you lucked out with him.” I lean forward and whisper conspiratorially, “you didn’t hear this from me, but I hear he’s something of a… King of the Snipers.”

The man in question arrives rolling down the path screaming, attached to his absurdly large backpack. “SOMEONE STOP THIS THING!” he screeches.

“Usopp?!” Kaya cries out.

“What’s he doing?” Luffy questions, looking far too eager to try it out himself.

“Whatever he's doing, we better stop him. He’s on a collision course with the ship,” Zoro intones. The two of them line up, and as Usopp comes rolling into them they slam their feet and stop him dead in his tracks.

“Th — thank you…” he whimpers, muffled behind the shoes in his face.

“No problem,” is Luffy’s nonchalant response.

“So you’re really going to sea, Usopp?” Kaya asks, smile still in place but just a hint of sadness peeking through.

Usopp stands firm. “Yeah. I have to go before I change my mind. Please don’t stop me.”

She shakes her head, resigned. “I won’t.”

I turn away from their interaction, climbing up onto the Merry after Luffy and Zoro, Nami right behind me. I lean over to murmur to Zoro, “do you think he knows yet?” He makes a questioning hum. “That he’s coming with us,” I elaborate. Zoro only rolls his eyes.

“Well, take care you guys! I hope we meet again someday!” Usopp calls up to us, unknowingly answering my question.

“Why?” Luffy calls back.

Usopp’s expression turns offended. “Huh, ‘why?’ You antisocial or something? We’re both gonna be pirates, we might meet again on the high seas!”

“What’re you talking about? Get on already,” Zoro huffs, jerking a thumb to the deck.

“We’re friends, right? So get on,” Luffy states.

“Get in loser, we're going pirating,” I add with an eyebrow wiggle.

Usopp just kinda stares at us for a minute, silent. “I… I’m the Captain, right?!” he yells, pumping his fists and running for the rope ladder.

“DON’T BE STUPID USOPP, I’M THE CAPTAIN!” Luffy hollers, upper body lunging over the railing. We all burst out laughing.

One more East Blue pirate to go.

Chapter End Notes

Usopp carry ngl. My boy deserves to do cool shit.

That Kaya/Usopp tag being relevant for all of maybe five paragraphs this chapter and then not mentioned again for like twelve chapters...

I really do like them though, they're so cute. See guys, I do like hetero couples occasionally!

Also here's Ed art. If you want it.

Updated Ed art from chapter 100 because redrawing old shit a year later is fun.

Chapter 11: Chapter Eleven: Dining At The Ritz We'll Meet At Nine, Precisely

Chapter Summary

Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy - Queen

"Alright! Our pirate flag is done!" Luffy announces the next day, holding up the most horrifying excuse for art I have ever seen. The other four of us stand in front of it with various looks of disdain.

Chapter Notes

For the record Sanji IS the Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy. I don't take criticism.

And once again an almost 4k chapter for you fine folks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first night aboard the Merry is nice. Nami cooks us up dinner, although she makes us pay for it (at the cost of Luffy's money, since I didn't have enough to pay for my own and I didn't want to spend what little I have), and we all retire with little fuss.

I settle down into a hammock in the 'ladies' cabin, Nami tucked into one right beside me. One good thing about saving a rich girl's life; I finally have something I can wear to sleep aside from my day clothes.

The last of the shouting from the boys cabin had died out a while ago, so it's silent save for the creaking of the ship. I've never had the best time falling asleep in new environments, and sleeping in a hammock for maybe the first time is not helping.

"What are you thinking about?" Nami's voice interrupts from beside me.

I glance over to see her eyes shining in the dark, directed at me. I chuckle quietly. “This is gonna sound so stupid, but honestly I’m a little scared of the dark.”

I can barely make out her expression but she seems surprised. “Really? Why?”

I shrug, though I doubt she can see that either. “I don’t like not being able to see if something is coming for me.”

There’s some shuffling as I assume Nami twists in her hammock. “Was it very dangerous, the place you’re from?”

I snort. “It could be, but for the most part it was very safe. I’m just… paranoid.”

There’s a short bout of silence as Nami seems to process this. “You could hold my hand, if you want.” My face morphs with surprise. Maybe Nami has better night vision than me, because she immediately starts stuttering. “Or not — sorry that sounded super stupid. It’s just when I was a kid and I got scared I used to hold my sister's hand — uh, sorry…” she finishes lamely. I don’t bother replying, I just stretch my hand over to her.

I end up missing and smacking her in the face, but her hand eventually finds mine.

We go back to a comfortable silence. It lasts for a few minutes before I break it by murmuring, “I think this’ll be my home.”

Nami’s thumb brushes over my knuckles. “The ship?”

I laugh quietly. “Yeah. The Merry, for as long as she’ll carry us. But more than that, this crew. I want this train wreck of a crew to be my home, my family,” I try to look at her through the darkness, “I hope it can be for you too.”

Her hand tightens in mine, and I fear for a second that I've pushed her too far again. "That would be nice," her response is almost inaudible, even in the nights quiet. I tighten my grip on her hand in return.

_____

"Alright! Our pirate flag is done!" Luffy announces the next day, holding up the most horrifying excuse for art I have ever seen. The other four of us stand in front of it with various looks of disdain.

"Calling him artistically challenged would be an understatement…" Usopp gapes.

"Maybe it's abstract..?" Nami bargains.

"A pirate's flag should be a symbol of death but… I guess it's terrifying in a sense?" Zoro says, bewildered.

"At the very least it'll scare off all the seagulls…" I hedge. Nami stifles a snort.

"You're beyond terrible! Leave all the drawing to me," Usopp proclaims. We spend the next ten minutes hunched, peeking over Usopp's shoulder as he paints out a new symbol. I smack him on the head when I see the direction he starts going. "Hey!" he complains.

I shake my fist at him. "Stay true to the source material, don't just design your own damn jolly roger!" He grumbles but starts over, this time sticking much closer to the original flags spirit.

"Ta da!~" he proclaims a few minutes later. This flag is a familiar one, something as truly iconic as the straw hat it features.

I slap Usopp on the back. “Nice work!” His chest puffs up in pride as the others join in on the praise.

“Usopp, draw it on the sail too!” Luffy requests.

While they do that, Zoro pads up beside me and reluctantly hands over 2,000 berri. “You win again, you little shit.”

I smirk up at him. “Honestly Zoro, it’s hurtful how long you doubted me.”

He snorts. “Oh please, it was a total shot in the dark when you first came up with the theory. The fact you were right was just a coincidence.” I genuinely can’t tell if he’s joking or just in denial.

I open my mouth to ask, but am interrupted by Luffy shouting, “ok! All done! The Going Merry is ready for action!”

I trot over and swing an arm over his shoulders with a grin. “Anyone got a bottle of wine we can crack open on this bitch?”

“We’re not wasting wine on that!” Nami yells, flopping to the ground beside the paints.

I shrug. “Suit yourself. I’ve got some shit to sort through down under, so please don’t blow anything up while I’m not watching.”

I gently cuff Luffy on the head, then start making my way down to the ‘ladies’ cabin. Me and Nami had shared it the first night, but I honestly hadn’t spent all that much time in there. Other shit around the ship had to be done.

Luffy races past me in the hall shouting, “hi Ed! Bye Ed!” headed in the direction of the cannon deck. Not my problem right now. I see him rifling through some boxes while I open

the hatch to the cabin.

Climbing down, the room is immaculately clean (entirely because of Nami). I pull out the drawers under the couch and take out a box of ammunition. Thank god Kaya had the foresight to leave a note about where she stored them, or it would have been months before I found them.

I have no fucking idea how to reload this thing.

The closest contact I've ever had with guns before this one were my grandpa's hunting rifles, and I had never even been allowed to touch those, nevermind load or shoot them.

With my limited understanding of all that shit, it seems the pistol can hold up to seven charges at a time, plus gunpowder, and the round shots that this thing fires should be relatively easy to carry around. Loading it mid-combat will probably still be a bitch though.

There's also the question of whether I need to take extra care to keep this thing dry, like a real flintlock pistol. So far there's been no problems, but if I ever take an untimely dip in the ocean before a fight I'm most likely fucked.

There's a loud bang of what I think is cannon fire that shakes the whole ship. Still not my problem. Moving on from the gun talk, I managed to acquire some necessities when we were in Syrup, mostly generous donations from Kaya.

A toothbrush, hairbrush, deodorant and other toiletries, sunscreen, some undergarments and a change of clothes. She had even gifted me a jacket I'm sure will come in handy if it rains.

I had claimed the drawers under the couch as mine, and now had all my shit stored in them. My phone, wallet and my keys (minus the penknife, which I have hooked to my pants) were all stashed in there as well.

Another bang of the cannon. Maybe I should deal with that. Or I could not. It would probably be smart for me to start planning my moves. If I'm gonna be in this world I'm going to improve it at least a little.

I don't want to fuck the plot up too bad, or everything I know becomes moot. And I'll be totally transparent, having future knowledge is very comforting. Also because these people need their character development and I don't wanna fuck with that.

We need to grow, as individuals and as crewmates. That's why I can't avoid all the hardship. The best and most I can do is ensure nothing terrible happens while keeping us as on track as I can, so I can keep being useful.

I only have one exception to this rule.

I will save Portgas D. Ace no matter what.

I give less than zero fucks about how that one is going to screw up the plot, that man lives or I die trying. My reasoning for this? I thought he was neat and his death made me sad. That's it.

So what to do about that? I can't think of a single way to stop him from going after Blackbeard without exposing where I came from, and that's not an option. If the world government knew I know what I know I'd be dead faster than I could blink.

My best bet is gonna have to be getting him backup. Sending the Whitebeards after him is the most logical course of action. How *I'm* gonna get in contact with them is the real question. I'm not optimistic I could get Ace to call them first when we meet in Alabasta, he seems like a stubborn prick.

I have to figure something out though, I'm not gonna let Luffy lose his brother.

Wait…

His brother! That's it! I can sic Sabo on him, that's like a whole flock of birds with one stone! Getting Sabo his memories back would give him sufficient reason to keep Ace alive, and he would have the mobility and resources to contact the Whitebeards, not to mention the value of having an in with the Revolutionary Army!

How the hell do I get in contact with him though? It's not like they're giving out the personal number of their Chief of Staff for kicks…

Except…

Except that the Strawhats cross paths with a Rev very early on in the story. In Loguetown.

Dragon.

_____

I've just drafted the beginnings of a letter when I hear some screaming and crashing from above deck. A muffled shout of, "come out you damn pirates!" indicates the arrival of either Johnny or Yosaku, I can't remember which.

I sigh and start packing up the paper and pens I had been using at the desk. Might as well deal with that idiocy quickly. I've just tucked everything away and started up the hatch when footsteps come thundering into the storage room above me.

Usopp and Luffy are crying and trying to haul a whole crate of limes out the door as fast as they can. "What the fuck is going on?" I grouse, following them onto the deck.

There I'm greeted by the sight of Yosaku on the ground, pale and bleeding, with a worried Johnny hunched over him. Nami and Zoro are hovering around them while Luffy and Usopp start cramming limes down the poor sods throat.

I look over to Nami. “Scurvy?”

She nods. “Scurvy.”

“Scurvy?” Johnny repeats.

“If we weren't too late he should be fine in a couple of days,” Nami replies.

Johnny immediately tears up and starts wailing. “R — really?! Thank you, Big Sis!”

Nami pushes him away from her, wiping spit from her face. “Don’t call me that.”

“It’s basically dying-of-no-fruit disease. Well, vitamin C fruits,” I pipe up.

Johnny, Usopp and Luffy are looking between me and Nami with stars in their eyes. “You’re just like doctors!” Luffy awes.

Usopp shrugs a smug shoulder. “I always knew you two were special, and I’m never wrong!”

Nami goes from bewildered to angry very quickly. “You *morons!* Every sailor should know about scurvy!”

Then Yosaku starts spewing out limes and jumps up, immediately grabbing Johnny as they start cheering and dancing around.

“The nutrients cured me!”

“My partner is fine now!”

“YOU CAN'T RECOVER THAT QUICKLY!” Nami screams.

They both stop and strike matching poses.

“Sorry for the late introductions. The name’s Johnny!”

“And I’m Yosaku. Zoro used to bounty hunt with us, nice to meet you!”

“Are you like… business partners or romantic partners?” I ask.

They both stare at me for a second in silence. “Partners,” they answer in unison. Fucken ok. Guess that answers that perfectly.

Zoro steps forward with a smile. “Small world, never thought I’d see you guys here!”

Johnny laughs. “If you think you’re surprised, we never imagined the Pirate Hunter Zoro would become a pirate himself!”

Zoro goes in for a handshake, but Yosaku picks that as the perfect moment for his illness to catch up to him, as he falls over with blood spewing from his face. “Partner?!” Johnny screeches.

“Get some rest!” Zoro snaps.

We get Yosaku set up in the storage room, then relocate to the galley. “Let this be a lesson to you,” Nami lectures.

Zoro nods along. “These are the kinds of pitfalls you encounter in a life at sea.”

“Which means when we’re at sea it's very important to think about how we can get the right amount of nutrients with limited food,” Usopp adds.

Nami nods. “It’s imperative that at least someone on the ship knows how to do that.”

I suck on my teeth. “Yeah… Don’t know if y’all noticed but I’m an awful cook.”

Zoro levels a flat stare at me from the floor. “You burned toast this morning. We know.” Then he scrunches his nose. “Actually, I can still smell it too.” I stick out my tongue at him.

Luffy finishes chewing on some bread. “Right! I’ve decided, we need a sea cook!” There's nods from everyone.

“That way, we’ll even be able to eat good food at sea!” Usopp cheers.

“What's the difference between a sea cook and a regular cook?” I mutter.

“If you're looking for a cook, I know just the place. Still, getting one of them to join you is a whole other matter,” Johnny pipes up.

Luffy claps and grins. “Okay! Where?”

Aw man here we go!

Johnny grins. “You should be able to reach it from here in 2-3 days. But it's close to the Grand Line, so you gotta be careful,” he tosses a pointed look at Zoro on the floor, “there are even some rumours about that hawk-eyed man you've been looking for.”

Sweat starts pouring down Zoro’s face as he smirks.

Ah, right. Dracule Mihawk. Should I be worried about him?

“If it's alright with you, I'll lead the way!” Johnny announces. “Our destination is the sea restaurant, Baratie!”

_____

“Hey Usopp, you good with a pair of scissors?”

The man in question turns to me with a raised eyebrow. I have my head poked through the emergency exit connecting the two cabins, and Usopp is sitting on the floor surrounded by random shit he had in his huge backpack.

“In what context?” he asks

I snort. “Like, have you ever cut hair? You seem like you have the fine motor skills for it.”

His chest puffs up as he rolls around to face me, big smug grin on his face. “Oh yes! Why back in my day I ran the most successful salon in the East Blue—”

“Ok, ok, enough,” I cut him off with a laugh, “I just wanna know if you could help me touch up my sides.” He raises an eyebrow, reaching into a pouch on his bag. I turn my head and part my hair to show off the shaved sides. “My hair is thick as hell, so It’s easier to manage

when the shit around my ears is cropped short. So what's the verdict, hair doctor? Can you operate?"

He laughs and holds up the pair of scissors he pulled from his bag. "The hair doctor will do the best he can!"

I scramble through the passage and plop down in front of him. "Make me beautiful!" I demand. We flash matching feral grins and he gets to work.

"Also can you teach me how to reload a gun please."

"Oh my god you're *hopeless."*

———

We reach the Baratie a few days later. Luffy, upon first seeing the floating restaurant, starts cheering and jumping. "It's a big fish!"

Me, Nami and Usopp all stare up at the thing in awe. "How cool!"

Our marvelling is interrupted by the blare of a horn. To our starboard a Marine vessel appears from seemingly nowhere.

Oh right, that Fullbody guy.

"The fucking Marines?!" Nami hisses.

Usopp nervously looks around. "They're not gonna fire on us, right?"

I pat him on the shoulder. “They probably will. We’re gonna end up paying some damages, I can feel it.”

He shoots me a look. “Don't jinx it?!”

“I’ve never seen that pirate flag before…” comes an arrogant voice from the other deck. The smarmy pink haired shit disturber strolls up to the rail and gives the Merry an uninterested once over. “I’m Lieutenant Iron Fist Fullbody! Who’s your Captain? Name yourself,” he demands.

I pinch Usopp before he can say something stupid. He looks back at me with a false innocent smile. I just give him the stink eye. Our captain trots forward. “I’m Luffy. We just made our pirate flag the day before yesterday!” he proclaims.

Fullbody huffs. “Oh, you're just… Hm?” He finally takes notice of Yosaku and Johnny cowering behind the storage room door, “I recognize you two, you're small time bounty hunters. So you’ve finally been caught by pirates, huh?”

The pair of them jump out, sputtering in indignation. Johnny throws a sheaf of bounty posters across the deck shouting, “you think small time bounty hunters would go after these guys?!” but Fullbody has already walked off arm in arm with his pretty lady friend.

I notice out of the corner of my eye Nami freeze, before bending down to pick up one of the posters. Oh shit, I forgot Arlong’s was in there! I hastily drop down and start collecting the other posters, then pluck his out of her hand and shuffle it to the back.

“Hey—” she starts, expression thunderous.

I just flash her an oblivious smile. “Those boys really should know better than to toss trash around, especially on our ship!” I say airily.

Nami seems confused, and makes a move to take the poster back. She's interrupted by the bang of a cannon, and Luffy catching and accidentally launching it right into the Baratie. Me and Nami both make choked noises.

“Ah fuck,” I mutter.

“Oh fuck!” Nami whimpers.

“Why do you jinx *everything?!”* Usopp wails.

I shove the stack of papers into Johnny’s hands while Luffy picks himself up from the floor.

I walk up to Luffy, who’s staring at the smoking hole in the restaurant with despair. He turns to me with his big apologetic eyes. “I didn’t mean to break the fish boat…”

I pat him on the shoulder. “I’m sure the ship is fine, but we’re going to go apologize now so we don't get murdered by angry cooks.”

We barely manage to make it to the ship in our dinghy before a couple of furious chefs come rushing out to meet us. I put a hand up and dip into a short bow, pushing Luffy’s head down to do the same.

“I’m so sorry for the disruption. Me and my Captain would like to formally apologize to the head chef and plead our case, if he would be amenable.” The two seafarers seem taken aback by my professionalism, but recover quickly to usher us inside.

We’re brought into the room Luffy had hit, and are confronted by a man in an extremely tall chef's hat with two braided moustaches and a pegleg.

Fuck this guys design is amazing.

Luffy immediately clocks onto his missing leg and falls to his knees wailing, “YOUR LEG!”

I cuff him on the back of the head. “No, dumbass! That wasn’t you!”

Zeff huffs from his seat. “The lady is right!”

I roll my eyes. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m not a lady. Or a man. Don’t worry about it.”

Luffy looks up at me through the brim of his hat. “Are you gonna have to correct people every time you meet them?”

I shrug, then wiggle my eyebrows. “If I get a bounty it'll correct people for me.” Luffy laughs.

“Am I correct to assume it was you pirates that blew up my restaurant then?” Zeff interrupts.

I turn to him and give another shallow bow. “Yes, sorry sir. Due to a… misunderstanding with one Lieutenant Fullbody outside, he deemed it appropriate to fire on us. My Captain attempted to redirect the shot and it ended up… in a less than advantageous position. So as Captain and First Mate, we’ve come to apologize.”

He raises an unimpressed eyebrow and I grimace. “I know how it sounds. You’re welcome to investigate our cannons, you'll find that none of them have been fired in a number of days. And while I can’t guarantee the Lieutenant will testify, his crew certainly saw everything. I’m sure they'd love to tell you.”

He rolls his eyes heavenward. “Don’t bother with all that, I’ll believe your tale. That still leaves the matter of compensation and repairs however.”

Luffy looks up with a completely straight face. “I’m flat broke!”

Zeff turns to me with a flat look. I make a ‘me too’ gesture. “Then you’ll have to work it off. Unpaid odd jobs around the restaurant for a full year!”

Luffy’s eyes bug out. “A full year?!”

I shake my head. “No can do. How about we negotiate a little, you and I?”

_____

I eventually manage to haggle the old man down to having Luffy repair the damages while I work unpaid as a server/busboy for a month. I also made sure to add in a ‘if we defeat a great evil, we’re off the hook’ clause for… reasons.

(“What the hell does that mean?”

“It’s customary where I’m from.”

“If you say so…”)

They get me set up in a waiter uniform, consisting of a white polo shirt black slacks and a waistcoat, and send me downstairs with a notepad and the instruction of, “take people’s orders!” and not much else. By the time I get down into the actual dining room Luffy probably has the entire hole repaired.

That hope is immediately dashed as Luffy falls through the ceiling in front of me with a scream, Zeff following right after him. I stare down at them in despair. “What the hell.”

“Ed! The floor suddenly gave out!” Luffy yells, scrambling up and over to me. I idly brush some debris off him.

“Owner Zeff! Can you *please* stop Sanji?!” come cries from some cooks I didn’t notice earlier, the lot of them trying to restrain a familiar blond boy in a suit.

“Are you rampaging in my restaurant again, you little shit?!”

They yell back and forth at each other for a while, eventually coming to blows. Zeff even nails Fullbody in the face with his pegleg, yelling, “GET OUT OF HERE, YOU CANNON FIRING IDIOT!”

I’m not even paying attention to it. There's only one thought in my head right now.

Good god that boy is pretty.

Chapter End Notes

Was Sanji barley in the chapter? Yes. Did I still name the chapter for him? Also yes.

I went antiquing yesterday and I didn't buy anything but I found a fucking sword and I wanted it so damn bad but it was $650 and I'm too poor to spend that much money on a sword.

Chapter 12: Chapter Twelve: Caviar And Cigarettes, Well Versed In Etiquette

Chapter Summary

Killer Queen - Queen

We just kinda watch Patty beat up and yell at a starving guy while people cheer. Look, I have nothing against violence and that kinda shit, but this is just kinda sad. The man is emaciated for god's sake.

Chapter Notes

Not only is Sanji the Good Old Fashion Lover Boy, he is also the Killer Queen. Mans just very Queen coded I don't make the rules.

This chapter contains a bit of homophobia/transphobia near the end (no it's not Sanji lmao). Stay safe and happy pride month <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment is interrupted by a Marine throwing open the front doors with a yell of, "Lieutenant! He's escaped!"

Luffy leans his head on mine and mumbles, "this restaurant is *weird."*

I'm still not paying attention to all that bullshit, there is a very pretty man present and I am easily distracted. I do start paying attention again when the bang of a gun firing echoes from the door.

The Marine who had barged in drops to the floor, bullet wound spewing blood as he falls. "Oh my god that guy's head exploded!" I hiss to Luffy, who just nods.

“Yeah, gnarly.”

I turn to look him in the eyes. “Did you just say gnarly?”

There's a loud crash as the chef whose name I think is Patty slams the Krieg pirate guy whose name I think is Gin through a table. I whistle. “That must have hurt.”

“That guy’s pretty strong,” Luffy muses.

We just kinda watch Patty beat up and yell at a starving guy while people cheer. Look, I have nothing against violence and that kinda shit, but this is just kinda sad. The man is emaciated for god's sake.

I notice Sanji slip away in the chaos, but then Patty is doing a dramatic curtsy and loudly proclaiming, “now then, ladies and gentlemen! Please enjoy the rest of your meals!”

I nudge Luffy and jerk my head up to the second floor balcony. He flashes me a bright grin and scampers off.

Zeff walks past me grumbling. He jerks his head back to the crowd, “get to work, busboy.”

I give him a half hearted glare, whipping out my notebook and pencil and sauntering up to a random table with a winning customer service smile.

_____

I heave a heavy sigh and slunk up to my crewmates table an hour later. “Having fun, busboy?” Zoro smirks.

I groan and slump onto the table. “I forgot how much I hate customer service…”

Nami laughs. “Chin up, you only have a month to go!”

“Does this mean the First Mate position is open then?” Usopp teases.

I shoot him a playful glare. “Nope. Only other person who can take that is Zoro, and he refuses.”

Zoro lifts his glass in a mock salute. “Damn right.”

“Ed, does that mean you’re gonna stop tryna worm out of it?” Luffy’s excited voice asks from the floor.

I shriek and jump back, looking down to see his head and hat peeking out from under the table. “The fuck are you doing down there?!”

He shrugs, a hand appearing from under the tablecloth to pick at his nose. “Owner Zeff threatened to make you stay longer if I kept breaking things, so I’m hiding.”

I flash him an incredulous look, “How could you have been breaking things? I specifically negotiated you a job where you’d be away from dishes!” I had to cite ‘general stupidity’ to swing that one. He gives me a big gummy smile but no response. Little shit. “Anyways—”

“Oh, dear ocean!” comes a dramatic proclamation from Sanji, who comes twirling up to our table, “thank you for these treasures you’ve shared from your depths!”

We all pause and turn to look at him. He continues unperturbed. “Oh love, laugh if you will, I cannot endure these passions from afar! As long as I could follow you two beauties I’m prepared to walk the path of a pirate or a devil!” I share a long hard look with Nami. Zoro

makes some kind of dying cat noise. “How tragic, that there is such a great obstacle standing between us!”

Oh he really is so cute… but, “uh, about that—”

“By obstacle, you mean me, right Sanji?” Zeff interrupts me.

“Damn geezer!” Sanji huffs, romantic air evaporating immediately.

Zeff scoffs. “This is an opportunity you don’t want to pass up, go be a pirate. I have no need to keep you here at my restaurant.”

Sanji turns on his heel. “I’m the Sous Chef here. The hell you mean I’m not needed?”

Zeff huffs. “You fight with the customers all the time. You flirt with every woman that walks through the door. And you can’t cook a decent meal to save your life. You're unnecessary baggage holding this restaurant down.”

The parenting approaches in this world certainly are… unique.

“Lets not forget that none of the other cooks want you here either. So be it pirate or whatever else, it's better you just get the hell out of this restaurant.”

Dear lord they're gonna get violent, aren't they?

I grab onto Sanji’s arm before he can start yelling. “Hey, hi. Yeah, it’s me again. Maybe you two should talk out your feelings instead of provoking each other? Just for my sake, I really don’t wanna have to clean up after that.”

The two pause to stare at me for a second. “Maybe you should stay out of it, busboy,” Zeff grunts.

This only seems to enrage Sanji more. “Watch your tone with the lady!”

I pat his arm where I’m still hanging on. “Er — we’ll deal with that subject later.”

I turn back to Zeff. “I’m just saying, maybe there’s better ways of getting Sanji to go than trying to irreparably damage your relationship to the point where he feels like he *has* to leave?” I roll my eyes. “I get that you two have one of those ‘I’m a man and can’t talk about my feelings’ complexes, but maybe put them on pause for a minute?”

Zeff grunts again, doesn't reply, gets up and walks away.

Silence reigns in the dining room. I swing back around to my group, who’re watching me with varying levels of interest and concern. “Heh, sorry,” I say sheepishly, letting go of Sanji’s arm.

He absentmindedly shakes his head. “Oh, no, it's fine.”

It’s a testament to how much my interference shook him, that he doesn’t immediately try to flirt with me.

“Hey, if nothing else take solace in the fact your relationship with your father is still leagues above mine!” I crack, pouring out some tea for the table.

Well at least his relationship with the one that matters…

“Yeesh, you’re a chronic oversharer, aren’t you?” Zoro groans, smearing his palm down his face.

This is what finally snaps Sanji into the conversation. He does this weird spin thing to land himself between me and Nami. “Please forgive me, lovely ladies! Is there anything I could get for you? Anything at all?” I fight back a wince, but apparently not well enough. “Is something wrong, my dear?” he asks worriedly.

I grimace and pull out a chair. “Ok so here’s the thing,” I start, pushing Sanji into the chair and sitting on the table in front of him, “I’m not really… a lady? I’m nonbinary. They/them. And you can treat me however you damn well please, I just ask that you not call me a lady or woman or things like that.”

He blinks slowly at me. “So you’re not a lady.”

“Yup.”

“But you're not a man either.”

“Mhm.”

“And you’re ok with however I treat you.”

“Yuhuh. And for the record, I do like to be spoiled. But that’s up to you.”

He nods, reaching up to fiddle with his tie with a furrowed brow. And let me tell you, that fucking swirly eyebrow is a fucking sight up close. I had no idea hair follicles could work like that.

“Alright. Ok.” Then he stands up and turns around. I exchange worried/confused looks with the rest of my crew. Sanji then spins back around with a flourish, brandishing two roses. One he hands to Nami with a wink and the second he tucks into the pocket of my vest. “They really should have put a beauty such as you in a better outfit!”

I frown down at my uniform. “I rather like it actually…”

He doesn't even blink. “That must be why you look so wonderful in it! Your confidence, it really pulls the whole thing together.”

I laugh, patting the blond on the cheek while I twist around him, planting him right in between Nami and I. “Cute, now how about you bug a customer instead of me? I *am* working, you know.”

Nami sends me an alarmed look over Sanji’s shoulder as she’s hit with the full force of his gentlemanliness at once.

I snicker and trot away to the next table.

_____

I finally get a chance to corner Zeff while bringing several tables orders back to the kitchen. “Excuse me, Mr. Chef Zeff Sir?”

He already looks like he’s tired of me. “Just Zeff is fine, busboy.”

I clap. “Wonderful. Quick ask, can I get your Transponder Snail number?”

‘Tired’ turns ‘bewildered’ very quickly. “The hell do you want with my snail number?”

I roll my eyes. “We’re leaving with Sanji one way or another, we’ll Shanghai his ass if we gotta. I just thought it’d be nice if he could still talk with his dad, and you with your son.”

He gives me a long hard look. I hold his stare. “Alright busboy. You manage to keep yer Captain from breaking a single dish for a whole day and the number’s yours.”

“You drive a hard bargain… Deal.”

It can’t be that hard to keep Luffy from breaking shit, right?

Who am I kidding, I’m gonna have to steal this motherfuckers number.

_____

The second day is… less fun.

I shoot awake in the night, fleeing the sound of crunching metal and screeching tires.

Fuck fuck fuck oh god ok.

Shit, alright.

God.

I've got trauma now, don’t I?

I roll ungracefully out of my hammock, tripping over unsteady feet and smacking my face into Nami in her hammock, sending it gently rocking. She makes a soft murmur but doesn't rouse.

I stumble up through the dark ship, eventually breaching the deck. I hadn't caught a glimpse of the clock in my haze, but it's still dark and stars still litter the sky. I sit down smack dab in the middle of the deck, not trusting myself to get too close to the rails in my state.

I just sit there, breath quick and hands shaking, staring at the wooden floor for god knows how long. I'm knocked from my reverie by somebody plunking down in front of me. I startle and snap up to see Luffy, wrapped in a blanket with an uncharacteristic frown marring his face.

I open my mouth to try and say something but all that comes out is choked breath. Luffy just looks at me for a second before he reaches up to his prized straw hat and flips it from his head to mine.

I freeze.

"You…" I start weakly.

He just shakes his head, free black hair flopping around his face. "You can hold onto it for a little while," he states, scooching across the deck towards me and unwrapping from his blanket.

He throws half over my shoulder and squirms his way under my arm. Then he flops back and pulls me down to lay on the wooden floor. I grunt at the sudden shift, but simply pull him in a little closer while staring up at the stars.

*They're so much brighter than home. And so **different.***

"That one there is my favourite. It's a giant monkey!" Luffy breaks the silence, pointing to a cluster of bright specks. I hum. "And that pointy thing beside it is a prince."

"Yeah?" My voice is hoarse and near silent, but Luffy takes it as the cue it is.

“Yup! The monkey ate a wish, so the prince went to go and kill it and take it for himself. But when he got there the monkey was sick. Cause eating wishes isn't good for you. And the prince felt bad, because the monkey must have wanted the wish for something, but he needed it to save his kingdom.”

I listen with rapt attention, soaking up every detail of something about this world I didn’t know yet.

“So the prince asked the monkey if he could share the wish, and the monkey said sure, but only if the prince granted him his wish when it was over. So they went back to the prince's kingdom and saved it from the bad guys, without having to use the wish because the monkey was so strong. And afterwards when the prince asked the monkey what his wish was, the monkey said he never wanted to be alone again.”

Luffy falls quiet for a second.

“Then?” I prompt.

“Then the wish made them into stars, so they could stay together and be friends forever,” he finishes with a small smile. I sigh, shuffling even closer to him. Being roughly the same height made it both easier and more difficult.

“My brother used to tell me that one. He was much better at it.” I imagine the raw hurt tickling at the edges of his voice would go completely unnoticed by someone who wasn’t squished so close to his neck.

“Luffy… why did you give me your hat?” I ask, barely more than a breath.

He pauses for a second. “You lost your treasure, right? So it’s ok if you hold onto mine for just a bit.”

I let out a shaky breath into the hollow of his throat.

Silence reigns over the deck, the faint noises of lapping waves and the creak of wood the only sounds aside from our breathing. “Do you know any more?” I ask softly.

I can feel his smile pressed into my cheek. “Yeah.”

He tells me story after story of the bright white dots in the sky, until eventually I fall asleep to the sound of his voice and the rock of the ship.

_____

“What the hell are you guys doing up here?”

I’m woken up by Nami's voice and the skees of gulls. I crack open my eyes to a dim yellow shade taking up my whole view. My hand comes up to rub them, but bumps into worn straw instead.

Ah shit, we fell asleep on deck. If my ass is sunburnt I'll cry.

“Shhh! Ed’s still sleeping!” Luffy whines from somewhere smooshed into my side.

“Not anymore,” I mumble, flailing about and knocking into someone's leg before getting into an upright position.

I tilt the hat up so I can take in my surroundings. Nami is towering over us, disappointed, and both Usopp and Zoro are snickering behind her. “What time is it?” I grouse, rubbing at my eyes.

“Breakfast. Owner Zeff said you’ve got an hour to eat before you’re back on the clock,” Nami sighs, jerking a thumb to the Baratie where I can faintly hear the sounds of hustle and bustle.

I don’t even bother changing. I just get up with a groan, stretching my uncomfortable back. Sleeping on the floor did me no favours. I turn to Luffy, who’s also jumped up and is twisting himself like a fucking owl. Horrifying creature.

I press his straw hat back onto his head, then lift his face and give him a quick peck on the cheek. “Alright, time for some five star continental breakfast, hoes!”

Zoro’s indignant squawking makes a valiant return. “Did they just call us *hoes?!”*

We tumble into the restaurant, empty save for a couple cooks setting tables and organizing menus. Sanji notices us entering immediately, his entire face lighting up as he skips towards us.

“Ah, even in pyjamas you’re still radiant!” he fawns. My ass is in plaid pants and a t-shirt… What is this guy seeing? “My lovelies! Please come have a seat, I’ll get you some food right away!” he claps, gesturing to a table.

“What about us?” Usopp grumbles behind me.

Sanji glares at him, “get it yourself.” Then trots off to the kitchen. Usopp throws his hands up in surrender while we all take seats.

“I dunno about you guys, but I like this dude a lot,” I say through a yawn, ruffling my hair.

Nami and Luffy both nod eagerly, but the other boys seem less than enthused. “He’s annoying. And weird,” Zoro deadpans.

“And so are you, he’ll fit right in!” I reply with a sweet smile. Zoro flips me off.

Then the man himself sweeps back into the dining room and to our table, plates of food balanced effortlessly on every inch of his arms. He starts spreading them around the table, taking extra care with me and Nami’s dishes.

“I hope this is to your liking,” he presses a kiss into Nami’s hand then turns to me and kneels like he’s about to propose.

“Sorry sweetheart, I’m not ready for marriage,” I grin, shovelling breakfast into my mouth.

He laughs and shakes his head, then pulls something out of his pocket and presents it to me. It’s a name badge with ‘they/them’ scrawled in Sanji’s neat script. I look down at him in surprise. “With this you won’t have to correct people while you’re working,” he explains, a genuine smile lighting up his face.

Mary Mother Jesus he’s adorable.

I grab his hands in mine and look him dead in the eye with the most serious face I can muster. “I would both kill and die for you without question.”

There’s choking noises from around the table and Usopp spews orange juice out of his long nose. “Hey! You haven’t said you would do that for me!” Luffy whines, almost falling out of his chair in an effort to lean on me.

I turn my head to give him another kiss on the cheek. “It needn’t be said, Captain.” He cheers and slides back into his place.

Sanji shakes our joint hands and mumbles. “I didn’t get a kiss…”

I drop his hands to go back to eating, grinning and rolling my eyes. “Yeesh, you’re both so needy!” Nami full body laughs while Usopp finishes mopping up his juice.

Breakfast is delicious, everything is cooked to perfection and the company is wonderful. My only complaint is that it’s over too soon.

In no time at all I’ve finished my meal and changed into my uniform, now complete with my pronoun badge. The first three hours are smooth sailing, nothing spectacular happens aside from Patty giving a dine and dasher the boot.

We’ve entered something of a slow hour, just a couple of solo diners and an elderly couple occupying seats. I saunter up to a couple that had just been seated, easy smile slapped on my face and a couple of waters in hand.

“Hello and welcome to the Baratie! I’m Ed, I'll be your server this afternoon. Have you had a chance to look over the menu yet?” I cannot believe I got my ass yeeted into an alternate reality and I’m up in this bitch doing a *customer service job.*

The woman smiles at me and points out a specific dish on the menu, the man accompanying her doing the same. “Wonderful choices, we’ll have those right out to you.”

The man nods. “Thank you, ma’am.”

My face pinches into a rough smile. “I’m not a woman, but you’re welcome all the same.”

His face twists in disgust. “You’re a man?”

I feel my bones go cold. “No sir, not a man either.”

He gets this confused scowl across his face. “Oh, you’re one of *those,”* he spits in disdain.

I drop the smile. “Excuse you?”

The woman looks back and forth between us, concerned. “Dear, now isn’t the time—”

He cuts her off with a huff. “Then when is it? We keep letting trash like this infect the sea they’re gonna think it's alright or natural!”

I would love to say I shot him down with a witty response, or had some kind of dramatic clap back.

I didn’t.

I turned, and I ran.

Chapter End Notes

I promised myself I would turn this fic off private when I had written 100k. I’m not saying we’re closing in, but we’re closing in.

Also me creating obscure lore about the constellations in One Piece? More likely and important than you think.

Chapter 13: Chapter Thirteen: Something Good Can Work For You

Chapter Summary

Something Good Can Work - Two Door Cinema Club

I stand there, breath ragged and eyes watering, for who knows how long before a knock sounds from the door. Because I hadn't closed it properly in my panic, it nudges open. I meet Sanji's worried eyes through the mirror.

Chapter Notes

Getting emotionally eviscerated by a twink is almost as embarrassing as getting sucker punched by one. This guy gets both.

Also why the fuck is college so expensive T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I crash into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me and not bothering to lock it properly. I stumble up to the mirror, hands coming up to grip the edge of the sink.

My pale face, despite all the sun I had been getting recently, stares back at me. Same brown eyes and beauty marks I've had my whole life, twisted by the panic plainly etched on my face. And all I can think—

Here too. Even with all of the acceptance I've gotten so far, here too.

I guess I should have figured, in a world where slavery runs rampant among the upper class they'd still have shit like homophobia and transphobia.

...

Shit, it's not like this is the first time it's ever happened to me, and he didn't even get violet! So why the hell—

Why the hell is it hitting me so hard?!

I stand there, breath ragged and eyes watering, for who knows how long before a knock sounds from the door. Because I hadn't closed it properly in my panic, it nudges open. I meet Sanji's worried eyes through the mirror.

"Hi," I wheeze out pathetically.

He pushes the door all the way open then closes it gently behind him. "Are you ok?"

I nod my head. "Yeah. Sorry I'm fine. I'll get back to work, just gimme a second…"

"No, you're not just gonna go back to serving that asshole!" he spits, hands coming up like he wants to grab my shoulders but unsure it would be welcome.

I furrow my brow. "It's fine, it's not the first time someone said rude shit to me and it won't be the last. That's just how life works."

He gets a resolute hardness to his face. "That's the best part about working at a restaurant like the Baratie, you can fight whoever the hell you want. They disrespect you, the food, or one of us, you kick their ass!"

I frown. "Sanji, I can't kick *anyone's* ass. The only fighting skill I have going for me is a pistol I can barely use! I'm basically worthless as a combatant!"

He shakes his head. “I’ve heard about the shit you’ve done for your crew so far, and you sound far from useless.” He counts off his fingers, “facing down a Marine gun squad, surviving a lion, holding your own against multiple famous pirates? That’s more impressive than over half of the East Blue!”

I glare at him. “Half of that was situational at best!”

He gets a smug smile like he won the conversation. “And you’re still alive to complain about it. At the very least that proves you’ve got guts. And on the sea, guts are half the battle. You could kick anyone's ass you want to.” I look at him for a long moment. He holds out a hand “And if you can’t, you'll have your crew or me to kick anyone’s ass for you. Being strong doesn't always mean knowing how to kick or throw a punch.”

I slowly take his hand. “At the very least I can yell at him,” I grumble.

He gives me a cheeky grin. “I hear you’re good at that too!”

He leads me back out into the dining room, passing a grumbling Patty who keeps giving glaces to the table while cracking his knuckles. “He wanted to fight him, I said you get the first shot,” Sanji murmurs down to me.

When we reach the table, the man is impatiently sipping at his water while his date looks ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. That danger arrives in the form of me stepping right up to them, Sanji stopped a few paces behind me.

I give the man a sickly sweet smile, contempt dripping from my every pore. The woman takes one look at the two of us and gets up. “I’ll just wait out by the boat…”

The man looks up at me and scoffs. “We’ve been waiting forever. Where is our food?”

“Sorry sir, we have a strict ‘no food for bigots’ policy.”

The incredulous look on his face… ah sometimes being hate crimed is worth it. “Excuse—”

“Ok here's the deal douchecanoe,” incredulous becomes bewildered, “you’re gonna get up off your ass and leave this restaurant, never to come back, or I’m siccing my lovely coworker Sanji on you as well as my Captain.”

He doesn't look entirely convinced, so I sink another nail in the coffin. “Just so you’re aware, I’ve seen my Captain eat men like you for breakfast. Literally. He's got quite the appetite! You ever heard of Buggy the Clown? He punched him so hard he flew across an island. You should start running.”

When that doesn’t look like it’s convincing him, I sigh and lean onto the table to get closer. “Listen bub, You don’t get the fuck out the door in the next five seconds I’ll rip your dick off and shove it so far down your throat ‘go fuck yourself’ will have an entirely new meaning for you, m’kay?”

The man goes pale. He slowly rises from his seat and cautiously steps around me. I stare him down all the while. His expression hardens and he opens his grubby disgusting little mouth. I don’t think twice about the opportunity presented to me.

I crack him right in the nose.

His head snaps back and blood spews out his clearly broken nose. Not a single word comes from his filthy mouth as he scrambles up from the ground and shuffles out the door after his date.

I shake my stinging fist out.

A slow clap comes from the table next to us, the ones near it joining in and soon the whole restaurant is clapping. I curtsy to the room at large. “Thank you, thank you. Please don’t forget to tip your waitstaff, and enjoy your meals.”

I don’t miss the proud smile on Sanji’s face or the huge grin and thumbs up from my Captain.

_____

The third day of being a busboy/waiter at the Baratie comes and goes quickly, between my crewmates’ attempts at ‘supporting’ me and Sanji sneaking me snacks whenever he sees me, it’s honestly not the worst service job I’ve had.

The real highlight of the day is during my lunch break, I get to sit down with the crew for an hour and vibe. And isn’t that amazing, a whole hour for lunch! This place is great.

Luffy, through a mouthful of food, suddenly blurts out, “hey Ed, I wanna sleep with you!”

The calm conversations around the table explode. Zoro does a spit take, Nami starts choking, Usopp screams and Sanji loudly protests.

I don’t bother looking up from my meal. “Yeah sure, but fair warning I wiggle and adjust a lot. And I’ll smack you if you snore.”

He flashes me a bright grin. “Fine with me!”

The table goes back to stuttering. “Don’t tell me you've been romanced by this buffoon!” Sanji wails.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “The hell you mean romanced? What’s that gotta do with sleeping with me?”

Sanji's whole face crumples. “The Captain and First Mate, truly scandalous…” Usopp mutters.

Luffy blinks at them dumbly. “Ed sleeps better when they’re with someone, did you guys not notice?”

“That doesn't mean you have to have sex with them!” Nami hisses.

HUH?

“I’m sorry *sex?!”* I guffaw, “he’s not trying to fuck me! Are you daft?!”

Luffy tilts his head like a confused puppy. “Sex?”

I pat him on the back. “Don’t even worry about it.” I turn back to the group at large, which looks significantly more relaxed now. “Besides, I’m aromantic. I’m not gonna fall in love with this idiot. And if I *was* gonna have sex, I’d pick literally anyone else.”

Sanji’s face explodes in red and he literally swoons, and Usopp gets a confused look on his face. “What’s aromantic?”

I shovel some more food in my mouth. “It means I don’t experience romantic attraction.”

Nami frowns. “So you’re never gonna fall in love? Isn’t that kinda… sad?”

I snort. “Why would it be?” A couple of them look like they have something to add, but I cut them off with a hand. “Romantic love isn’t the only thing that makes life fulfilling. I love you guys, I love being a pirate and a detective, I love the world around me and the shit in it, and I love you,” I smack a kiss onto Luffy's giggling face, “even if it’s purely platonic. That’s good enough for me.”

The lot of them look satisfied with that response. “I think that's me too,” Luffy decides, a stick of bread stuck in his mouth. I hum in question. “Aromatic. Me too,” he clarifies.

“Aro*mantic,* hun. If that’s how you feel, fuck yeah. Live your truth babe.”

He grins with a mouthful of bread that goes spilling out of his face. The entire table bursts into rampant laughter, hands banging on the table and heads thrown back.

“What a strange crew…”

_____

On the fourth day I make sure my pistol (which I know how to reload now, thanks Usopp!) is tucked into my waistband before I start work. I get a strange look from Sanji that I wave off with a, “got a weird feeling,” that he takes at face value, going back to work with a smile.

The day's calm comes to an abrupt end when some random customer takes a glance out the window and starts screaming, “it’s Don Krieg’s pirate ship!”

The chefs immediately start yelling at Patty while the guests start panicking. “Talk about a huge ship! Gin must be back to repay his debt to you!” Luffy proclaims.

Sanji shakes his head. “Somehow I doubt that's the case… But it’s strange…” It’s at this point we all clock onto the fact that this big imposing ship is in absolute tatters. “There’s no way damage like that was done by a person, had to be a natural disaster or something,” Sanji guesses.

“You’d be surprised by the kind of shit happens on the Grand Line, could honestly be either. But judging by those slash marks… I’m willing to bet it was a person,” I muse, looking around. “Where’s Zoro when you need to gamble?”

The doors slam open. The rattling of chains follows two figures inside. Don Krieg, arm thrown over Gin's shoulder, garbles out, "sorry for intruding… could I have some food and water..? We have money…"

I'll give him this, he's a pretty good actor.

"Guess he's hungry?" Luffy mutters beside me. Sanji leaves our side to start up the stairs. Then Don Krieg collapses to the floor and Gin starts begging for help. Patty bursts out laughing and orders someone to call the Marines.

"I won't do anything…" Krieg mumbles, struggling into a bow. "If you give me food, I promise I'll leave quietly… so please — please help me..!"

I'm trying really hard not to roll my eyes.

"Should we be worried about the armour and heavy artillery this guy's sporting under that coat?" I pipe up. A couple of the cooks turn to me surprised, and Krieg regards me with a sharp eye not befitting his 'weak' state.

But then Sanji is kicking Patty out of the way to deliver a plate of food and a bottle in front of the pair. "Here, give this to your Captain."

Gin stares up at him. "Thank you, Sanji," he says reverently.

Krieg starts shoving handfuls of food into his mouth, actual goddamn tears coming out of his eyes.

Then Carne, another chef, jumps forward to start yelling, "Sanji, take that food back this instant! Do you have any idea who that man is?! The ruler of the East Blue, the King of Deceptions! Don Krieg!" He goes on to tell Krieg's story while the man in question continues scarfing down food. "Letting a demon like him starve to death is for the good of this world!"

I see Krieg shift forward, and I remember that his ass fucking clotheslines Sanji in this scene. Not to-fucking-day.

I whip out my pistol and take aim, not having a whole lot of faith in my bullet finding its mark. The bullet bounces uselessly off his hidden armour, but it does sound a loud clang that freezes the whole dining room in its tracks.

Six bullets left.

Krieg's outstretched arm never finds Sanji, who jumps back as he hears the clang.

"Hands off our cook, fuckface!" I yell. Maybe drawing attention to myself at this moment is stupid. Really stupid. I turn to Luffy at my side and whisper, "I actually fucking hit something I was aiming at this time! Did you see that?"

He gives me two thumbs up and a bright smile. Nailed it.

"Don Krieg! This isn't what you promised! I lead you here because you said you wouldn't touch this restaurant, or hurt the man that saved us!" Gin yells frantically.

Krieg, with a mean scowl painted on his face, grabs Gin by the shoulder and breaks it in the process. He shoots a nasty look at me that has me shrinking behind Luffy, before his attention goes back to the room at large. "Yes, that was delicious, I feel alive again," the man straightens to his full height, towering in the middle of the dining room.

The restaurant goers take that as their cue to start screaming and running out of the doors.

Krieg sweeps his eyes across the ship, lingering on both me and Sanji before he declares, "nice restaurant you've got here. I'll take it."

“Hey Gin! Are you alright?” Luffy calls down.

Gin doesn't bother with a reply, he just grits out, “what about your promise?” to Krieg. Patty finally picks his head up and notices what's going on around him, he takes one look at Krieg and promptly puts his head back down.

“My ship’s a wreck, so I’ve been looking for a new one. Once my business is done with you, you’ll all be leaving this ship,” he announces, drawing protests from the cooks. “There’s about a hundred subordinates on my ship, all starving and critically wounded,” he glares down everyone who makes sounds of disagreement, “so prepare enough food and water to feed all one hundred of them. Some have already starved to death, so make it quick.”

Carne starts yelling again.“You’re asking us to feed them knowing they’re gonna steal our ship?! We refuse!”

Don Krieg’s face goes stony. “Refuse..? It seems there's been a misunderstanding. I wasn’t asking. I’m ordering you,” then he screams, “and nobody disobeys my orders!” For a man in a leopard print shirt, he actually is a little intimidating.

“Sanji… sorry… I didn’t mean for this to happen…” Gin wheezes into the floor.

“See Sanji, this is all your fault!” Patty screeches.

I roll my eyes. “Not like it’s Sanji’s fault he’s a good guy.” Patty glares at me, but Sanji tosses me a small smile that makes it worth it. He turns back in the direction of the kitchen.

“Where do you think you’re going?!” Patty demands.

Sanji just blows a puff of smoke. “To the kitchen. I’ve got a hundred meals to cook.”

Luffy makes a surprised noise beside me which is almost drowned out by the other chef's shouts of protests as they pull weapons on him.

"What are you, a spy or something?"

"We're not letting you into the kitchen!"

"We're fed up with your reckless behaviour!"

Sanji doesn't even flinch, he just spreads his arms. "Fine, stop me if you want. It's not a secret how big of a scumbag Krieg is. But that doesn't matter to me. Thinking about the consequences of feeding a person… what a hassle." I feel Luffy lean forward at my side. "A cook should freely be able to feed anyone who's starving! Is that wrong?"

There's a moment of silence over the room. Then Patty conks Sanji over the head.

I shove my face into Luffy's shoulder with a groan. "Stupid emotionally constipated cooks, stupid ocean mob bosses, stupid stupid stupid…"

His hand comes up to pat my head. "Ooh he's got a shrimp gun!"

"I'm sorry *what?"*

Patty indeed has a shrimp gun when I lift my head. He shoots the damn thing, which turns out to be a *meatball cannon,* into Don Krieg, apparently not heeding my earlier warning about his armour.

Krieg gets up perfectly fine. Because of the armour I warned them about. Funny how that works.

“Listen to me next time, god! And don’t forget the heavy artillery, it's still in there!” I grouse from the stairs, attempting to do a twirl with my pistol. I almost drop it.

“Maybe you should shut your mouth!” Krieg yells.

I put my hands up in mock surrender, shuffling behind Luffy. “I’m shutting the fuck up now.”

Big scary men yelling at me has always been a weakness of mine… and not in a sexy way.

The cooks charge toward Krieg but get absolutely decimated by the HEAVY ARTILLERY HE HAD. THAT I WARNED THEM ABOUT. There's just no winning with idiots is there?

“They don’t listen very well, huh?” Luffy says, adjusting his hat.

“You damn worms think you can defy me?! I’m the strongest!” Krieg starts on his long winded rant of self importance, which I tune out.

I see Zeff drop the bag full of food at Kriegs feet from over Luffy’s shoulder.

“Owner Zeff! How could you give them that food? Once they recover they’ll take over the ship!” a cook yells, scandalized.

Zeff scoffs, “that’s only if they have any fighting spirit left at all.” I see his impressively tall chefs hat turn to regard Krieg. “Isn’t that right, defeated warriors of the Grand Line?”

The chefs explode in shock, I even see Gin start crying.

“Grand Line?!” Luffy gasps in front of me.

“Called it,” I toss out.

“You’re… Red Leg Zeff! Peerless Captain and cook of his own crew,” Krieg gapes, face white in shock. “So you were alive…”

“So what? It’s got nothing to do with you. I’m just a cook now,” Zeff grunts.

“Haha… funny you put it that way… The way I see it, you’re living as a cook now not by choice, but because it's the only thing you can do.” I can’t hold back my snort. Kriegs’ eyes once again dart to my hiding form. “Something to say, coward?”

I let out a full laugh, leaning over Luffy's shoulder to give him a pitying grin. “Sorry, its just — well imagine fucking *Red Leg Zeff* letting a pegleg stop him from kicking *anyones* ass. That man could probably cave my skull in with barely a thought!”

Zeff huffs a short laugh. “Damn right, busboy.” He turns back to Krieg, “even if I couldn’t fight, I can still cook with these hands. But what are you getting at exactly?”

“You’re a man who braved the Grand Line, and came back without injury. You must’ve kept a log of that time… so hand that over to me!” Krieg demands.

“You’ve really been to the Grand Line?” Luffy awes at Zeff, who nods.

“Your friend seems to know all about it, just ask them,” he huffs.

I pat Luffy on the back, “later.” He grins.

Zeff stares up at Kreig. “It’s true I kept a log, but I won't give it to you. That log’s the pride of me and my men who sailed the Line together. It’s much too valuable to give to the likes of

you!”

Kriegs face goes red in rage. “Then I’ll just steal it from you! It’s true the Grand Line defeated me… but even so, I’m still the mighty Don Krieg! I had the strength, ambition, and manpower! I just lacked information!”

I stage whisper down to Luffy, “not everyone is as smart as I am. Sucks for him.” He tries to smother his laugh, but Krieg still gives us the stink eye.

“Once I obtain the log book, I’ll reassemble my pirate fleet and find the One Piece to become the greatest pirate of this era!” he proclaims.

Luffy stomps down the steps and points a finger at Krieg. “Hold it right there! The one who’ll become King of the Pirates is me.”

There’s silence throughout the restaurant.

Then the chefs start yelling at him. “Stand down kid, or you’ll be killed!” Patty screeches.

“I’m not standing down, especially on this!” Luffy declares.

“Did you say something, brat? If you take it back, just this once I’ll let it slide…” Kreig grits out.

Luffy shakes his head with a grin. “It’s fine, you don’t have to. I was only stating the truth.”

Krieg’s whole face twitches. “This ain’t a game.”

Luffy keeps smiling. “Of course.”

Two familiar voices sound from behind me.

“You planning to rumble, Luffy? Need a hand?”

“It’s fine if you don’t!”

I turn and see both Zoro and a shaking Usopp sat at a table. “Oh hey guys, didn’t hear you come in,” I wave.

“Hey guys! It’s fine, you can just stay sitting. I can handle this clown,” Luffy waves them off.

“He does have a good track record with clowns…” I muse, which gets a snort out of the boys.

Krieg also starts laughing. “ *These three* are your crewmates? A rather small bunch, aren’t they?!”

“That’s not all! I’ve got two more!” Luffy frowns at him.

“You just counted me, didn’t you?!” Sanji sputters.

“Don’t joke with me, punk! Even my fleet of fifty ships and five thousand pirates were utterly decimated by that sea in seven days!” Krieg yells, setting off more panic in the chefs. “Your bluff speaks to your inexperience! If there’s one thing I hate, it’s empty boasting like yours! Keep saying that and I’ll kill you.”

Krieg hauls the giant bag of food over his shoulder. “I’m going to go feed my underlings. Those who don’t want to die can leave now and escape. The only things I’m after are the log

book and this ship. If any of you feel like dying even after I warned you, so be it! I'll bury you at the bottom of the sea!”

And with that he turns on his heel and strides out of the doors, silence in his wake.

“What a cunt.”

Chapter End Notes

Not pictured: Zeff holding back the Strawhats from decimating the transphobe so Ed can do it themselves.

When I said no romance with Ed I meant NO ROMANCE WITH ED.

Also I went and saw Across the Spider-Verse in theatres TWICE this week and may I just say: HOT DAMN.

Chapter 14: Chapter Fourteen: All The Hope, Drop Down Like A Domino

Chapter Summary

> *Lifetimes - Oh Wonder*
>
> I snort. “Oh you know, typical Grand Line pirate. Kind of a douche and fucking terrifying. Probably decimated those wackjobs because they were annoying him. Maybe you disturbed his nap?”

Chapter Notes

> Burned myself at work :(God is no longer fond of me.
>
> Also I don’t use anything like grammarly I don’t have an editor I don’t have a friend look this over I just go in RAW because I like living on the edge. I will never change.
>
> (April 2024 edit from the future, that's still true. That is literally why the Big Edit™ is happening. You did this to yourself, you fool.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We watch Zeff, Sanji, Gin and the cooks yell at each other for a while.

“So, what do you think about him? Pretty good, right?” Luffy grins, sitting down on the table.

I hop up beside him with a matching smile. “I just *adore* him.”

Usopp flails his arms around. “Who cares about that?! We gotta get outta here!”

Zoro rolls his eyes. “Calm down. Our enemies are wounded pirates.”

Luffy nods. “That’s right. Besides, I gotta fight that guy.” Zoro gives him a curious look. “If he really is strong, then we’ll have to fight eventually anyways!” Luffy elaborates.

I give him a blank look. “That's normally not how the world works, but for you it just might.”

Luffy turns back to the throng of cooks. “Oh that’s right, Gin. You said you didn’t know anything about the Grand Line. But didn’t you guys go there?”

Gin hunches further in on himself and clutches at his head. “I still don’t know. What happened to us on the seventh day on the Grand Line… I don’t know if it was real or a nightmare…” He trains his eyes on the ground in a thousand yard stare. “I saw things I can’t bring myself to believe… that entire fifty ship fleet, destroyed by a single man!” The restaurant explodes in shock, noises of fear coming from Usopp and cooks alike. “I don’t even know how many ships managed to survive, it's just too terrifying to be real! I don’t want to remember that hawk-eyed man with a glare sharp enough to kill a man! I don’t want to remember!”

“How unlucky to run into him…” I mutter. Zoro shoots me a look I can’t decipher, face sweaty and hands clenched on the table.

“Must be the Hawk-Eye… Your description of his gaze isn't enough to prove his identity, but the fact that he sank your entire fleet is enough for me.” Zeff grumbles.

“Hawk-Eye Mihawk…” Zoro mutters beside me.

“Probably the guy you’re looking for, right?” I ask. He gives me a stiff nod.

“You guys know him?” Luffy asks, thumbing his hat.

I nod and close my eyes. “Yup. Dracule Mihawk, strongest swordsman in the world. And one of the Seven Warlords of the Sea.”

Luffy tilts his head like a puppy. “What’s a Warlord?”

“Government sanctioned pirates. Where I’m from we’d call them privateers.” I poke him in the head.

“What kind of man is he?” Usopp asks.

I snort. “Oh you know, typical Grand Line pirate. Kind of a douche and fucking terrifying. Probably decimated those wackjobs because they were annoying him. Maybe you disturbed his nap?”

Gin jolts forward. “That’s bullshit! You mean he destroyed our entire fleet for that?!”

Zeff huffs. “Don’t get so uppity, it was just an example. But busboy is right, that’s just the kind of place the Grand Line is.”

“Full of horrors left and right. And every other direction,” I agree.

Luffy is practically vibrating with excitement next to me. “Haaa! It sounds so awesome! We definitely gotta go!”

“Do you even understand the concept of danger?!” Usopp screeches.

“It seems my life’s goal will be achieved on the Grand Line, considering that man is out there as well,” Zoro states, thumbing the hilt of Wado.

“...Bunch of idiots. You lot are the type to rush to their deaths,” Sanji huffs.

Zoro stares him down. “True, but I’d rather you leave out the idiot part. When I decided to become the world's greatest swordsman I threw away my attachment to life. The only person who gets to call me an idiot is me.”

Luffy throws his hand in the air. “Ooh! Me too!”

Usopp crosses his arms. “As a real man the same goes for me.”

I shake my head. “I’ve got an itemized list of things I’ll die for, but my pride ain’t on there.”

“...What a load of crap,” Sanji mutters, blowing smoke out of his mouth. I see Zeff smirk out the corner of my eye.

“Enough!” Patty shouts, “do you realize the situation we’re in?! That galleon parked outside is the flagship of Don Krieg! So why don't we check back into reality and *deal with this!”*

The cooks start arming themselves when we hear the tell tale war cries of the newly revived Krieg Pirates storming towards the ship. We can see them rappelling down lines from the door of the ship.

There's a loud swish, and the galleon splits apart with a crash. “Ah shit. Mihawks here,” I mutter under my breath, jumping up to follow Luffy and the boys.

“Nami, Yosaku and Johnny are still outside on the ship!”

Seeing the massive ship sliced to ribbons… the people in this world are fucking terrifying. That is *terrifying.*

“Bro!” come the screams of Yosaku and Johnny, swimming frantically for the Baratie.

“What happened to the ship? Where’s Nami?” Zoro asks panickedly.

“That… I’m sorry Big Bro. She’s gone!”

“She took all the treasure and sailed away!”

Oh, that's what I was forgetting. Fuck.

“SHE DID WHAAAT?!” we all scream in unison.

———

Yosaku and Johnny lay out the events for us, and Zoro is grinding his teeth. “Dammit! She just had to make a bad situation worse!”

“Kaya gave *us* that ship! Heartless witch!” Usopp cries.

I stay silent.

“Wait! I can still see the Merry!” Luffy announces, pointing to a slowly shrinking shape in the distance. He turns to the dripping boys. “Where’s your ship?”

“We have it moored to the restaurant.”

Luffy spins back to the rest of us. “Zoro, Usopp, take it and follow Nami!”

Zoro scoffs. “Just let her keep it, that woman is way more trouble than she’s worth.”

“I want her to be our navigator, no matter what!” he states, brow furrowed.

Him and Zoro make some intense eye contact for a second before Zoro smears a hand down his face. “Alright, alright. What a high-maintenance Captain… Okay you two, let's go.”

I shake my head. “I’ve gotta stay here with our stupid Captain and make sure he isn't stupid. Besides, I made a deal with Zeff, can’t leave without closing that.”

“You fucking people…” he mutters, jumping onto the small ship, Usopp in tow. “Be careful, the situation is getting a little crazy.”

“Don’t worry—”

“IT’S HIM! THE MAN WHO DESTROYED THE FLEET!”

We spin to see a small coffin shaped ship float through the wreckage of the galleon. “That’s him…” Zoro stutters, sweat dripping down his face.

I say this with the utmost respect, for a man wearing a giant feathered hat and half naked in an objectively very stupid outfit… why he kinda…

I lean over to Zoro. “3,000 berri says that man lives in a mediaeval castle and walks around in a ‘killed my husband for the money’ robe.”

He pulls out of his reverie just long enough to give me a disturbed look. “You barely have that 3,000 berri to lose.”

I wink. “Nope, but you do!”

He rolls his eyes, then turns back to his focus. “Sure, fine,” he decides absentmindedly.

Never say I don’t bet on things with less than 100% odds.

Zoro stalks forward to confront Mihawk and Usopp turns to me curiously. “What's a husband murder robe?”

“Big, dramatic, fur-lined, optionally sheer. The kind of thing a rich lady buys after her husband dies under ‘mysterious circumstances,’” I state.

He gives me a disgruntled look. “…And why would Dracule Mihawk be wearing one?”

I shrug. “He’s got the same vibes as my estranged gay uncle.”

“It’s him! Roronoa Zoro of the Three Sword Style!” someone yells from the ship.

“We’re losing sight of the Merry!” Usopp shrieks.

“Pitiful, weakling,” Mihawk mutters as he jumps from his coffin boat thing (what’s up with that anyways?) onto a sinking section of Krieg’s ship. “If you’re a competent swordsman you should see the disparity in our abilities even before we cross swords. But still you challenge me. Does your bravery come from your conviction, or from ignorance?”

Zoro is a much stronger man than I, if he talked to me like that I’d cry.

“It comes from my ambition, and a promise to a friend,” Zoro states through his sword.

“The world's strongest swordsman vs Pirate Hunter Zoro, what kind of a fight will it be?” Patty questions.

“I love Zoro, but his ass is about to get flattened,” I groan.

Both Johnny and Yosaku whip around to stare at me. “How can you say that?!”

I level a flat look at them. “Zoro is tough shit here in the East Blue, but there’s a reason this place is known as the weakest sea.” I turn back to the standoff. “Dracule Mihawk is the strongest swordsman *in the world* . Zoro can’t scratch him. Not yet.”

The look Luffy gives me feels like it probes into my very soul. I stare back unflinching into the void of his eyes. “Hm,” he breaks off his gaze, something softer but no less focused bringing its attention back to the swordsmen. Mihawk’s already pulled out his butterknife when I turn my eyes over there.

The fight is… very one sided. Zoro is just no match for the grace Mihawk wields, even in the form of a tiny cross-shaped knife. He would probably be just as good with my fucking penknife, the crazy bastard.

In no time at all Mihawk is unsheathing Yoru. With a final move, the battle is decided. Zoro slides Wado back into its scabbard, his only unbroken sword. He turns to face down Mihawk, blood bright red over his front.

“Scars on the back are the shame of a swordsman,” he declares.

Mihawk's smile is manic. “Splendid.”

Then he bisects Zoro.

Even knowing damn well he'll be fine, I can't help the full body flinch and involuntary half lunge I make, Luffy letting out a yell next to me. "Zoro!"

He rushes forward, fist reared back. I jump onto his back. "He's fine! He didn't kill him!" I scream, trying to reel his arm back in like fishing line.

"You're his comrades? This one speaks truth. I didn't kill him," Mihawk announces.

I whip my head up, not noticing how close we had skidded to the swordsman. The most piercing yellow eyes I've ever had the misfortune of being caught in meet mine.

Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god—

Mihawk regards me with a detached sort of curiosity. "Are you a swordsman as well?" I furrow my brow and shake my head. He sighs. "Shame. Two interesting fights in a day might have cured my boredom."

What the actual fuck does that mean?!

I should say something.

"I really dig the gothic vampire bird thing you got going on. Immaculate vibes."

NOT SOMETHING THAT STUPID. GODDAMNIT.

The curiosity disappears like smoke, replaced by exasperation and no short amount of disdain.

“Bro, answer us!” Johnny screams from the water, a coughing and heavily bleeding Zoro in his and Yosaku’s arms.

As they drag his body onto their ship with the help of Usopp, the swordsman speaks, “I am Dracule Mihawk! It is much too early for you to die. Know thyself! Know thy world! I will hold this seat of the strongest and wait for you. So forge on with that fierce conviction and surpass my sword! Become strong, Roronoa Zoro!” He turns to Luffy. “Boy, what do you aim for?”

Luffy doesn't back down a bit at his intense stare. “King of the Pirates!”

The manic smile spreads across Mihawk's face again. “A lofty goal indeed, even harder than surpassing me.”

Luffy sticks his tongue out at him. “I’m doing it anyway!”

His burning gaze turns back to me. “And you?”

I blink. Why does this dude care about what I want? “I’m gonna make my Captain King,” I say. I feel like if I repeat what I said to Luffy in the dinghy without absolute certainty, this man will cut me down where I stand.

He seems to stare right through me. “Yes, but what do you want for *you?”*

What does that mean?

...

*What **do** I want? Was my goal from the boat genuine enough?*

I do want to make Luffy King of the Pirates, but…

*But I **know** he'll be King. There's no other alternative, nothing I do will change that. So what do I want?*

Hm.

"I want to solve the greatest mystery of all, the One Piece. And all the mysteries along the way," I meet his gaze unflinching for the first time since he's arrived, conviction taking over my face, "I'm gonna solve it all."

Including why the hell I'm here.

He rewards me with a solitary nod.

"Usopp, is Zoro alright?!" Luffy yells to the boat.

"Alright's a stretch, but he's alive!" is his response.

Everyone falls silent as Zoro raises his sword in the air. "L — Luffy! Can… you hear me?"

"Yeah!"

"Sorry for worrying you… I know you need nothing less than the greatest swordsman in the world. I let you down — please forgive me!"

Dear god he's spitting blood.

“I swear,” the world seems to hold its breath for his declaration, “that I’m never going to lose again!” Tears are pouring out of his eyes, but he continues. “Until the day that I fight him and win… I swear! *To never lose again!”*

His words ring like a church bell, or a death knell. It reverberates through the air like a physical force, demanding attention and acknowledgment.

“Any problems, King of the Pirates?!”

Luffy’s face splits in a dazzling grin. “Haha, Nope!”

I can’t help the dumb smile that overtakes my face.

“You’re a good team. I want to see you three again in the future,” Mihawk says, spinning on his heel and stalking towards his ship with a flourish of his cape.

“Hawk-Eye! Didn’t you come all the way here for my head. The ruler of the East Blue, Don Krieg?!” the man in question shouts with a smirk. Lame bitch.

“For a while, yes. But I’ve enjoyed myself enough here, so I’ll return to my nap.”

*His ass **was** napping! Why didn’t I make a bet with Zoro when he was still conscious…*

Krieg decides it’s a great idea to fight Mihawk, like an idiot. Mihawk sends off one more attack, shattering the galleon even more, then fucks off into the great beyond.

“That was fucking intense,” I mutter.

Luffy hums, “what an interesting guy.” Then he hooks an arm around my waist and shoots us back to the Baratie with minimal trouble.

“Usopp! Go ahead, I’ll leave Nami to you!” he yells to the little boat.

“Alright! Zoro and I’ll bring her back for sure! So you make sure to get us that cook!” Usopp responds while he throws Luffy’s hat, which I hadn’t even noticed was missing in the commotion, “once we have the six of us, let's head to the Grand Line!”

Luffy stretches and catches his hat, slapping it onto his head and laughs. “Yeah! Let’s!”

I call out to them as they leave, “remember, question everything! Always look for the truth behind the truth!”

Wait, was that a Fullmetal Alchemist reference? Oops, I’m mixing realities. Giving cryptic but not obtuse advice is hard…

He yells back a confused, “uh, sure!”

I spin back to the chefs of the Baratie. “Remember that ‘defeat a great evil’ clause?”

Zeff huffs a laugh. “You’re good, busboy. So be it.”

I clap. “Wonderful! Because I want precisely zero part of this. Imma go eat me some seafood.” I spin on my heel and march right through the busted up doors of the restaurant, heedless of the shouts of outrage around me.

“You really wanna miss this Ed?” Luffy pouts as I leave his side.

I smirk at him over my shoulder. “I know I’ve been doing crunches every morning, but these abs can’t stop bullets. You’ve got this more than handled. Besides, don’t you wanna see what our new cook is made of?”

He smiles and nods his head. “Ok!”

That of course doesn’t mean I’ll be leaving them with nothing…

“Before I go… There’s a guy in heavy armour in the water right around there, you can literally see the bubbles. Krieg supposedly has some kinda toxic gas as a last resort, don’t forget about that. Oh! And please no one forget Gin is here. He’s still Krieg’s man. Ciao!”

And with that I slam the doors shut.

Some rich person must have left some good seafood around here, right?

_____

Some rich person did in fact leave good seafood around. Lots and lots of it. Who the fuck would abandon their table when they had fucking curry mussels sitting on it? My ass would face Krieg for these things.

You may be wondering why the hell I’m not out there helping. To that I have one thing to say: are you fucking nuts?

I’ve got worse aim than a stormtrooper and the situational awareness of a baby. I’m a liability in pretty much any fight. Now in my defence, I'm gonna work on that.

Not gonna be weak forever.

But right now I sure as hell am! So once I get some half decent accuracy up in this bitch, *then* I'll help in some fights. Besides, the boys have got this.

I can hear periodic screams and some crashing from outside, but for the most part I'm pretty absorbed in these curry mussels. God *damn* the chefs here know how to cook.

The relative calm of my meal is rudely interrupted by a sudden flood of cooks bursting in and shutting the doors behind themselves. Patty turns and catches sight of me slurping down a mussel.

"Yo," I hold up a peace sign. "The gas? I did warn you. Did any of you grab my Captain? Or Sanji for that matter?" There's some guilty looks flashed about. I heave a sigh, then suck down another mussel. "Figures. They'll be fine, but someone better get something for Gin."

On that cue Sanji's screaming comes filtering through where some chefs have cracked the door, "Patty, get the kit!"

"Put the mask on him! It will detoxify the gas in his lungs, then take him up to the second floor to breathe." Zeff instructs. I pointedly keep quiet about how fucking incorrect that is. Anime logic is weird…

"Anyone see a table with crab?" I ask, draining the last of the sauce from my pilfered bowl of seafood. The look Zeff gives me is very Disappointed Father™ and I don't know how to process that.

There's more crashing and yelling outside but I'm focused on the dish I've just spotted. "Oooh is that lobster mac n' cheese?"

A chef glares at me. "What the hell is wrong with you? Are you not worried about your Captain at all?!"

I glare back, incredulous. “No? Why should I be? My Captain isn’t gonna lose to *Krieg* of all people! Plus he’s got Sanji to cover his back. I ain’t got shit to worry about besides demolishing this mac.”

I ignore the surprised looks so I can eat the goddamn mac n’ cheese. And good gracious *lord* is it great. It’s good we’re taking Sanji with us, I would have fucking kidnapped a cook from here anyways if we weren’t. Put ‘em in a sack and everything.

I’m partway through a half finished shrimp linguini when there's a series of explosions outside. I keep ignoring that shit.

Things finally quiet to a degree after one last scream from Luffy and a very loud crash. I’m just finishing a plate of calamari at that point. “Should you really be eating this much?” a cook mutters to my left.

I glare at him. “Mind your own damn business.”

He raises his hands in surrender and backs away slowly. Krieg seems to yell one last hurrah outside before Gin steps in and the Krieg Pirates retreat.

An injured and dripping wet Sanji hauls an even more injured and wet Luffy inside a few minutes later. He flashes me a tired smile, “my apologies for the disturbance, dear. I can get you something to eat once I get this idiot upstairs.”

I laugh, patting my stomach. “No need, I was clearing out all the leftovers during the fight. The range of flavours here is amazing! Can’t imagine why anyone would leave in the middle of a meal like these!”

It’s actually a little weird, I could not stomach this much food before coming here… odd.

The surprise and awe on his face as he takes in all the dishes I had stacked during my scrap crusade is lovely. The slow genuine smile that lights up his face makes something warm

settle in my stomach. “So be it. Would you like to join me upstairs while we wait for this moron to wake up? I can make us some tea.”

I jump up from my chair and sling Luffy’s free arm over my shoulder. “Sounds like a date!”

I end up pulled to the ground with a yelp by the combined body weight of Luffy and Sanji as he dramatically falls to the ground in tears.

“Stop crying weirdo!”

Chapter End Notes

Why can Ed inhale an entire restaurant's worth of food in one sitting? Take a wild fucking guess.

Also Mihawk... What do you know....

Chapter 15: Chapter Fifteen: She May Contain The Urge To Run Away

Chapter Summary

> *Breezeblocks - alt-J*
>
> I raise an eyebrow and look over each of the surprised chefs. “You should know Sanji, he’s been here longer than any of you. He’s stubborn as a fucking mule, do you really think that is what would get him to leave? Idiots.”

Chapter Notes

> Dropping this chapter early for the girlypops and ONLY the girlypops.
>
> Bit of a slower transition chapter before the shit show that is Arlong Park.
>
> When you guys read do you imagine the scenes or do you just vibe with the words I'm genuinely curious.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“My hat!” Luffy yells, waking with a start a few hours later.

“On the table!” I call from the balcony, where me and Sanji are leaning on the bannister with cups of tea in our hands.

“Have a good nap?” Sanji snorts, rolling his eyes.

“What happened to the pirates?” Luffy asks, scrambling to the edge of the bed.

“They left, thanks to you,” Sanji replies, taking a long sip of his tea. “‘Let’s meet out on the Grand Line.’ Gin said that before leaving,” he adds.

Luffy rocks back and forth on the bed, scratching his nose. “He said that to you?”

Sanji almost drops his tea in his haste to turn with a scowl. “To you dumbass!”

“We’re off the hook for working here too, because of my additional clause,” I say with a wink to Luffy.

He giggles and hops off the bed. “So Sanji, you wanna—”

“I’m not gonna run away with you to be a pirate,” Sanji shuts him down immediately. “I’ll continue to be a cook here until that damn geezer acknowledges my skills,” he says, staring out at the sea.

Luffy shoots me a look. I roll my eyes. “Fine, then I give up,” he grumbles, latching onto the back of Sanji’s collar.

“Your hand hasn't!” Sanji chokes out. “I can’t just leave, these bozos’ are completely undependable. But still, I promised myself… One day I’ll go to the Grand Line,” Sanji sighs after I remove Luffy’s hand from his throat.

“Let’s go then!” Luffy exclaims, bounding up beside me and shoving himself between me and the balcony.

“Not just yet though,” Sanji continues. He turns his gaze from the wide ocean to give us the most dazzling smile. “Hey… Do you know about the All Blue?”

We listen to his impassioned rant with rapt attention. He gesticulates wildly, seemingly oblivious to the smiles me and Luffy exchange beside him. He’s a keeper.

_____

The dining bell sounds some time later, so the three of us make our way to the employee dining hall together. When we arrive, it’s to not a single available seat.

“There's no chairs for you,” one cook sneers.

“Ha, just eat on the floor!” another simpers.

“No chairs? This is a goddamn restaurant, how's that possible?” Sanji asks incredulously.

I stalk up to the nearest cook. With the height advantage him being seated grants me, I lean over him almost nose to nose, dead faced and wide eyed. This is a trick I used to use to scare kids. “Move please.”

He scrambles out of the chair so fast it almost topples over. “Yes, sorry, excuse me,” he whimpers, scuttling around to a different table. I slide into the chair and kick my feet up on the table, helping myself to a spoonful of the soup left at his spot.

Take that Zoro, I can be intimidating. Kind of.

I groan at the first mouthful, “fucking Christ that’s good.” I swipe a mostly empty glass of water from the table and tap it firmly with my spoon, sounding a clang that makes the quiet chatter of the mess hall silent.

“Hi guys. Just wanted to make something clear, since it’s written on all of your faces. Pretending that Sanji’s food is garbage won’t make him want to leave,” I state. The cooks turn to stare at me slack jawed and shocked. “Close your mouths,” I order. The loud simultaneous clack of teeth punctuates the silence of the room.

I raise an eyebrow and look over each of the surprised chefs. “You should know Sanji, he’s been here longer than any of you. He’s stubborn as a fucking mule, do you really think that is what would get him to leave? Idiots.”

I see Patty open his mouth to protest so I throw my spoon at him. Amazingly enough, my cutlery aim is much better than my aim with guns, so I nail him right on the nose. “Silence, fool! Unless you have something genuinely important to say, zip it.”

He rubs his nose but stays quiet, sufficiently cowed.

I turn around to the bewildered Sanji, still stood in the doorway with Luffy. “Sanji, dear, would you please wait outside for a moment?” I reach up and slyly flick my ear with a wink, hoping he’ll get the message to listen in.

He blinks a couple times before slowly nodding and backing out of the room with a two finger salute, shutting the door behind him. The room is silent as they wait for someone to say something.

“How’d you figure all that, busboy?” Zeff grunts from his seat.

I shrug. “Observing your behaviour over the past few days, seemed like your most likely course of action.”

He huffs a laugh. “Seems I’m getting predictable in my old age. You’re right, that was the plan.” He casts an eye about the room. “We all know what a phenomenal chef he is. But honestly, I can't see much other way to get that idiot to listen to us.” He turns to Luffy, who’s slithered his way over to my seat and is chowing down on someone else's soup and other food, “hey kid, would you mind taking that lil’ eggplant with you? Take him to the Grand Line… It’s his dream.”

There’s some murmurs of relief from the cooks about not having to put on a show, and people asking for more helpings of soup.

Luffy tilts his head and slurps down some more soup. “Nope.”

There’s cries of outrage from everyone in the room.

“I thought you wanted a cook for your ship?! Is he suddenly not good enough?” Zeff asks, incredulous frown plastered on his face.

Luffy smiles and keeps eating. “He’s good enough alright. I’d love it if he came with us. But he says he wants to stay here and be a cook. So ask all you want, but I’m not gonna take him.”

“The kidnapping thing was a joke. Mostly,” I add.

“So you won’t accept unless he says it himself,” Zeff guesses, stroking his fantastic moustache.

“Yup. More soup please!” Luffy hoists up his empty bowl and mine, which he managed to suck down while I wasn’t looking. Dick.

“Well… fair enough. But who knows if that hard-headed brat will ever agree to go with you,” Zeff grunts.

“Probably learned that stubbornness from you,” I point out in a sing-song voice. He rolls his eyes.

Then there’s loud screaming and a crash as the door — and half the wall — is destroyed by Yosaku, half stuck in a pan shark. He crashes through it in a spray of wood and plaster.

We all stare at him slumped on top of Sanji on the floor. I blink slowly at the pair. “This is… one of the weirder situations I’ve found men in.”

“A Fishman?”

“Did he come all the way from Fishman Island to eat here?”

The chefs mumble as me and Luffy push our way through the crowd.

“Oh, Yosaku!” Luffy greets.

The man in question slowly tilts his head, tears streaming down his face. “Oh hey, Big Bro Luffy…”

“Why’re you alone? Where are the others? Did you find Nami?” Luffy starts shooting off while a few cooks pull the shark off Yosaku and set him up on a chair.

“We never actually caught up to Big Sis Nami, but from the direction she was going we’re pretty sure we know where she’s headed,” he says, eyes downcast.

“Oh good, then let’s go get her,” Luffy nods.

Yosaku grimaces. “Well… if what we’re thinking is right, her destination is pretty damn dangerous,” he puts up his hands, “in any case, we need your help! Please come with me!”

Luffy gives a solid nod. “I don’t really get it, but I got it. Let’s go.”

I smear my hand down my face with a groan as we begin to walk out the ruined hole of the door. “If this is leading where I think it's leading, shit’s about to get a lot more complicated.”

Yosaku looks at me over his shoulder. “So you already know, Big Bro Ed?”

I nod my head. “I’ll lay out my theory on the way there, but we should book it if we want to get there in time to help anyone.”

As we walk past Sanji he calls, “wait.” We turn to look at him. “I’ll go too. Take me with you.” There’s silence from the chefs as they take that in. “I’ll accompany you on your way to be the King of the Pirates,” he repeats. “After all, we both have crazy dreams. So I’ll tag along to fulfil mine. I’ll be the cook for your ship,” Sanji blows the smoke from his cigarette, “sound good? Or bad?”

Luffy’s face explodes into a smile as he jumps into the air with a whoop. “Sounds great! Alright!” he cheers, then hooks an arm around my neck and starts dancing around while Sanji says his goodbyes to the cooks. Luffy jumps up on my back in a terrible imitation of a piggyback while I laugh.

“Thank god, I was gonna feel so bad if we actually had to kidnap him!”

_____

The next hour is spent running around the restaurant gathering supplies and loading them onto the ship they’re lending us. I’m pulled away from helping at some point by Zeff with a call of, “busboy! Got something for you.”

I trot over and he hands me a piece of paper with a string of numbers written on it. I look up at him, surprised. Zeff lazily grins down at me. “Your Captain might have broken the restaurant, but he somehow didn’t break a single dish. So fair’s fair, here’s my snail number.” His eyes soften just a little. “You take care of the lil’ eggplant for me, alright?”

I snort. “He doesn’t need me to take care of him. But, I promise I’ll support him any way he needs,” I hold my hand out, “it’s been an honour working here, Mr. Chef Zeff Sir.”

He sounds a hearty laugh and clasps my hand for a firm shake. “You’d do better at any restaurant that ain’t mine! Only come back here if it's for food or a visit!”

After that I make my way down to our little boat. “Big Bro Cook sure is taking his time…” Yosaku mutters while we climb into the ship.

The man in question takes that as his cue to stroll out of the restaurant, nothing but a sack over his shoulder. The crowd is dead silent, then Patty and Carne jump out of fucking nowhere to attempt and rock his shit.

“Payback time!” they both yell, leaping at Sanji with weapons raised.

Without him missing a single stride, Sanji slams both of them into the ground. There’s a droning “Ooooh” from the crowd like we’re back in middle school and someone just got called down to the principal's office.

“Let’s go,” Sanji says once he gets to the edge of the deck.

“You’re not saying goodbye?” Luffy asks.

Sanji shakes his head, “it’s fine.”

I give him a pointed look and glance around at the gathered cooks, then up at the ship.

“Sanji,” Zeff calls from the top balcony, “don’t catch a cold.”

Sanji freezes. We can see tears start to gather on his lash line, that he futilely tries to blink away. He spins on his heel and slams his forehead into the deck.

“Owner Zeff! Thank you for taking care of me for so damn long! I’ll never forget for the rest of my life… the debt I owe you!” he cries into the wood.

The silence of the cooks dissolves as they all start to shout their goodbyes and well wishes.

I hook an arm around Luffy with a smile that he returns eagerly. Sanji jumps onto the boat and screams to the crowd, tears and snot falling down his face in cascades, “let’s meet again, you good for nothing bastards!”

“Let’s set sail!” Luffy cheers as we drift out onto the water.

———

Twenty minutes into the trip and Yosaku still hasn’t stopped crying.

“Cheer up already,” Luffy demands.

“I — I’m just so touched! It was truly a beautiful goodbye, Big Bro Cook!” he wails.

“Ok, stop now,” I groan, shoving my hand in his face.

“Ahhh! I wanna bring Nami back so we can go to the Grand Line already!” Luffy yells, shuffling along the bow of our tiny ship.

“Even with Nami, don’t you only have six people? Is that enough?” Sanji questions, lighting up another cigarette.

Luffy hums, “if it's more crew members I need, I’ll get 'em on the Grand Line!” Sanji rolls his eyes. “Ed, you said you had some kind of theory about the place Nami is right?” Luffy

asks, moving into criss-cross applesauce.

I nod and direct my attention to Yosaku. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but right now we’re headed for Arlong Park.”

He nods, wide-eyed. “How’d you know that?”

I settle down against the bow and cross my arms. “Let me break it down. Nami definitely has some connection to Arlong, it was obvious by how she reacted to his wanted poster. She hates his ass, no matter what she says. It’s the kind of resentment that builds over a very long time. Her penny pinching tendencies also seem old hat, probably developed when she was younger. If I had to guess, I’d say the two are linked.”

There’s nods from Sanji and Yosaku, who seem to be following my logic pretty well. Luffy already looks confused. I continue, “so why does a child develop a fixation on gathering wealth in regards to a pirate? Possibly because she owes him money?” I twist a piece of my hair. “More likely, he’s extorting her. Me and her once had a chat about carrying the weight of where you’re from. It’s either he’s using memory of the place she’s from as leverage to get money from her, or actively holding her home hostage. I’m willing to bet on the latter.”

There’s a moment of silence on the ship before all its occupants explode into noise.

“Poor Big Sis Nami!”

“That evil man! How dare he extort beautiful Nami!”

“I’m still confused!”

I pat Luffy on the knee. “Mean man is being mean to Nami.”

“Ah!” he nods, “so let’s go beat that guy up!”

Yosaku’s eyes bug out. “Are you crazy?! Do you have any idea who Arlong is?!”

Both Sanji and Luffy nonchalantly shake their heads. “Nope.”

Yosaku looks seconds from snapping and throwing us all overboard. “Have you heard of the Seven Warlords of the Sea?”

The boys nod this time. “Ed told us a little about them, like how the sword guy who beat Zoro was one,” Luffy replies, sticking a finger up his nose. I smack him on the thigh until he removes it.

“Well one of these Seven Warlords is the Fishman Jimbei, and his price for joining the Warlords was setting that terrible monster loose on the East Blue!”

Oh, I forgot about that. Damnit, if I had a way of calling up Jimbei to kick Arlongs ass…

Actually that would do everyone's growth no favours. But in all fairness calling up Arlong’s parole officer would be fucking hilarious.

“Hey now, I hear Jimbei is actually a lovely person. Let's not blame people for the actions of others,” I scold, wagging my finger at him. Yoskau gives me a weird look that I cannot begin to interpret.

“Like this?” Luffy asks, holding up a picture of a fish with a bunch of legs and fins. Sanji bursts out laughing.

“TAKE THIS SERIOUSLY!” Yosaku screeches, “he’s stronger than even Don Krieg! He’s straight from the Grand Line!”

“More like this?” Luffy holds up a slightly different drawing of a fish.

“That’s the same fish standing upright,” Sanji grouses.

“That’s your issue with it?” I squint at him.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I’M TRYING TO SAY?!” Yosaku screeches.

“Yeah, there’s a strong Fishman dude, got it.”

“YOU CAN’T IMAGINE THE POWER HE WIELDS!”

“I’ll see when we get there.”

“Yeah chill out Yosaku.”

“TALKING TO YOU IS USELESS!”

I heave a long sigh. “Yosaku, Luffy’s gonna fight whomever the fuck he wants to fight, their pedigree be damned.”

Luffy flashes a bright grin and a peace sign while Yosaku cries into his hands.

“Either way, I think it’s lunch time,” Sanji announces, clapping his hands. “My dear Ed, what would you be in the mood for?” He bats his eyes at me, completely ignoring the other two.

I wave my hand. “Whatever they want, I’m not picky,” I make a face, “unless it's lettuce. I really hate lettuce. Oh and I get texture issues from applesauce… I’ll write you a list.”

He blinks. “That would actually be super helpful,” then he turns to the other boys, “so what do you want?”

“Meat on the bones!”

“Sauteed bean sprouts!”

“Coming right up!”

_____

We get a solid *maybe* hour of peaceful travel filled with wonderful food and Yosaku’s terrified whimpers. Then… then the giant cow fish shows up.

“I deal with a lot of weird shit because of you people, but a cow the size of a bank is where I’m drawing the line for today,” I groan, smothering my face in my hands.

“What is that?”

“It’s huge…”

Both Sanji and Luffy’s subdued reactions are drowned out by Yosaku’s throaty scream. This cow Sea King is one of Arlong’s pals, right? Uh — Momoo? Maybe?

“It’s actually kinda cute, if it doesn't kill us…” I mutter, shovelling the last of my food into my mouth before Luffy or the cow can steal it.

“S — S — S — SEA MONSTER!” Yosaku screeches.

“Cow?” Luffy questions with a tilt of his head.

“Cows don’t swim. A hippo?” Sanji muses.

I stare at our newest member long and hard. “Sanji you beautiful moron…”

“IT’S A GRAND LINE MONSTER!” Fucking god Yosaku’s voice gets shrill. Ouch my ear drums. The giant cow leans over our tiny boat, sniffing through his giant gold ringed snoot. “It must want the food!” Yosaku concludes. “Hurry up and give it the food before it flips the ship!”

Luffy’s face cycles through the five stages of grief at record pace, settling on anger as he rears back his fist and delivers it into the poor cow monster's cute face. “Don’t you dare touch my food!” he hollers.

I smack him upside the head. “Don’t just hit the cute cow thing! He didn’t do anything to us yet!”

Yosaku whips his head to me, tear stained face stretched in horrified outrage. “ *Cute?!* What part of *sea monster* did you not get?!” Big cow moos at us in a volume that could probably crack stone. “NOW IT'S MAD AT US!” Yosaku looks seconds away from soiling his pants.

“I’ll sock it one more time then!” Luffy announces.

Me and Sanji both punch him at the same time. “Dumbass! Don’t just beat something up for being hungry!” Sanji shouts. He looks up at the cow with compassion shining in his visible eye. “I’m sure it’s injured somewhere so it can’t find food on its own, isn’t that right?” He

holds up a plate of food to the sweet cow. It tentatively opens its mouth, only for Saji to nail it right in the chin with a bone shattering kick and a scream of, “DIE!”

“NOOOO!” I wail, sinking to the ground with dramatic tears running down my face.

“Who’s side are you on?!” Yosaku squawks.

“It was about to bite me too, what could I do?” Sanji defends.

“How could you?!” I sob as the poor baby rears up over our ship with a howl.

“Why I oughta—” Luffy grumbles, gearing up a fist.

Sanji puts a hand out. “Get back. I’ll do it.”

With a single spectacular kick the cow fish flops into the waves. Luffy shoves a piece of bread in my face like he’s trying to mop up my tears.

“You guys *suck.”*

Chapter End Notes

I feel so bad for the cow. Justice for Momoo 2k23. Also Ed out here reverse Sherlocking this shit to not seem psychic is the vibe.

Guys put funny notes in your bookmarks I wanna see 'em.

You have no idea how exited I am for you guys to read Arlong Park. You are not ready I promise you.

Chapter 16: Chapter Sixteen: I Was A Kid Until I Fixed It

Chapter Summary

Oh No Darling! - Sarah Kinsley

There's a lot of screaming. Especially from me and Yosaku. Hey, you try being hurled through the air at high speeds with nothing to tie you down but some rubber guy who's more concerned about sticking his arms up like he's on a fucking roller coaster!

Chapter Notes

I took Monday off work and wrote a whole three chapters. Slay.

Ahhhh I'm so fucking exited for you guys to experience this arc I'm real proud of it !!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We end up harnessing the power of our aquatic bovine friend by latching onto the poor things horns to pull our ship. I feel terrible, and we've probably shot to the top of an animal cruelty watchlist.

"I don't think I've ever been more upset with you guys."

"I said I'm sorry!" Luffy whines, sprawled on the floor with me sat on his back.

"I'm so sorry, my beloved, please forgive me!" Sanji simpers, half splayed off the little boat. Dramatic bitch.

"We're bad people," I moan into my hands.

Yosaku, who has been watching the proceedings with a silent bewilderment, finally pipes up, “what would that alternative even be?”

I visibly flounder for an answer, “...asking politely?”

“That’s stupid!” Luffy yells from under me.

“Brilliant! We’ll try that next time!” Sanji proclaims, springing up into the middle of the boat.

“Look I just think being unnecessarily violent with the cow was a little mean—”

“I can see Arlong Park!” Yosaku suddenly announces. Luffy scrambles out from under me to scrabble up towards the bow and awe at the approaching island. Then the structure begins to veer slightly to the right.

“Hey! You’re going the wrong way! Turn left!” Sanji yells, grabbing onto the side of the ship as we pick up speed.

“Hold onto your asses, partyboys!” I groan, hooking an arm around Luffy and praying.

The shore gets closer and closer at concerning speeds, until Momoo comes to an abrupt stop that slingshots our ship above shore and land, careening on a collision course with the distant ground.

There’s a lot of screaming. Especially from me and Yosaku. Hey, you try being hurled through the air at high speeds with nothing to tie you down but some rubber guy who’s more concerned about sticking his arms up like he’s on a fucking roller coaster!

“Yahoo! It’s like we’re flying!” said guy cheers, pulling me kicking and screaming up the bow of the ship.

“Almost?!” Yosaku cries.

“WE ARE FALLING MORON!” Sanji screams.

“I WANNA GO HOME!” I sob.

We crash through the tree canopy and start skidding along the dirt. “I should have gone with the advance party!” I wail.

“Hey it’s Zoro!” Luffy suddenly proclaims.

Indeed, we’re hurtling towards a horrified Zoro at breakneck pace.

“WHAT THE FUCK—”

I’m not going to lie, the crash hurts a little. I go rocketing out of our splintering ship, ass over teakettle and screaming, skidding along the road in a pathetic facsimile of a somersault. I smack into something solid, roll a couple more times, and come to a stop with a groan.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” the shape under me wheezes in Zoro’s voice.

“What do you mean? We’re here to pick up Nami. Why haven't you found her yet?” Luffy’s voice answers.

I feel Zoro trying to push me off but I stay put. “Five more minutes… Let the world stop spinning first…” I mumble into what I think is his stomach.

“Look what you did! You broke our First Mate!” Zoro berates.

“Where’s Usopp?” Luffy asks.

I’m suddenly shoved into the dirt as Zoro clammors to his feet. “Shit, Usopp! We gotta hurry!” I roll onto my side so I can see Zoro starting down the path we’re on.

“What’s wrong?” Luffy asks while helping me to my feet.

Zoro stares back at us imploringly. “That dumbass got caught by Arlong! We gotta hurry before they kill him—”

“He was already killed!” Johnny’s voice sounds from behind us. “Big Bro Usopp… was murdered by Big Sis Nami!” he shouts, tears pouring out from under his sunglasses.

We all freeze for a second. Then Luffy is lunging out of my arms at Johnny.

“Woah!” everyone starts shouting at once.

I grab Luffy around the waist to try and haul him off the poor guy. “Say it one more time and I swear I’ll kick your ass!” Luffy yells, bicycle kicking his feet as I lift him off the ground to drag him away.

“It’s not like it’s Johnny's fault!” Zoro yells.

“He’s making up bullshit! There’s no way Nami would kill Usopp! We’re crewmates!” he roars, flailing so hard it sends the two of us tumbling into Zoro.

Johnny looks on with a frown. “It’s fine if you don’t believe it… But I saw it with my very own eyes! She’s a murderer!”

“No she’s not. Calm down,” I grouse, passing Luffy to Zoro like a feral cat. Johnny takes a step forward looking like he wants to start yelling at me, but Luffy snarling and snapping his teeth makes him pause. “Oh please, I know Nami. Despite herself and whatever deal she has with Arlong, she’s actually come to care about us. So she didn’t ‘kill’ Usopp and she probably never had any intention of hurting him,” I state, arms crossed and face stern.

“Is that so?” Nami’s flat voice intones from behind us. Silence reigns as we all turn to stare at her. “As always, you think you’ve got it all figured out. Newsflash *detective* , you’re dead wrong this time,” she spits, expression dead and eyes mean.

I hold her stare for a long second. “...Nice glove.” Her posture visibly stiffens as she crosses her arms to hide the hand, scoffing as she does. I stare her down. “What exactly did I get wrong, pray tell?”

Nami glares at me. “You don’t know me. You’re just some random pirates I swindled out of their money. I’m not your crewmate, and certainly not your *friend,”* she spits the last word like barbed wire clawing out of her throat.

Luffy tugs out of Zoro’s lax hold. “What’re you talking about? Of course you are. We came to get you!”

She scoffs. “Don’t make me laugh. You’re just pathetic enough to deserve each other.”

Luffy’s eyes widen as Johnny pushes in front of us. “Damn you! You killed him, I watched you do it!”

I shake my head and mutter under my breath, “no one ever fucking listens to me.”

“So what? Would you like to try and avenge him?” Nami says with a smirk. Johnny makes a shocked noise. “Word to the wise, fellas. Because of your *friend's* stupidity, Arlong wants Roronoa Zoro and all his companions dead. No matter how monstrously strong you think you all are, you’re no match for the real monster. I promise you, you stay on this island, you die. Not that it matters to me.”

“Nami! It’s me! Do you remember me? Let's run away together!” Sanji suddenly shouts, lovestruck look plastered across his face.

“Shut up! You’re just complicating things!” Zoro shouts at him.

Sanji’s face flattens into a glare. “What was that? Don’t you know love is like a hurricane! Look at me when I’m talking to you—”

“Nami, where’s Usopp?” Zoro demands.

The twitch of her face is almost imperceptible. “At the bottom of the ocean.”

“Damnit, cut the crap!” he yells, drawing this sword and lunging. He’s stopped short by Sanji launching a kick at him.

As the two of them start to bicker I mutter down to Luffy, who’s still staring at Nami with an unreadable expression, “I get the sinking feeling they’re gonna be like this all the time…”

“If you’re gonna fight, do it off the island. You outsiders have no right to butt into this island's affairs. Don’t you get it yet? The only reason I got close to you idiots was to rob you blind, but now that you’re completely broke you’ve lost your charm.”

I’ll give her this, she’s a much more convincing actor than Usopp was. If I didn’t know what I know, and wasn’t paying attention to her micro-expressions, she might have convinced me too.

“So go, take your ship. Find a navigator dumb enough to join you and find the One Piece or whatever. Now get off this island! You’re an eyesore!” Her smirk melts into something cold and impassive. “Farewell.”

“Nami…” Luffy murmurs, before he suddenly flops to the ground. Johnny and Yosaku make shocked noises. “I’m gonna sleep,” he announces.

“At a time like this?!” they both shout.

He simply closes his eyes, folds his hands under his head and relaxes. “I don’t feel like leaving the island yet, but I don’t really care about its affairs either. And I’m tired, so I’m sleeping.”

There’s noises of outrage from the whole group, but I just plop down next to him. “I’ve hung out in worse places, and honestly hearing all that bullshit tired me out too.”

“Fine, do whatever the hell you want! You can die for all I care!” Nami screams, tearing down the road away from us.

There’s silence among the group for a moment as they process. “Are you really going to take a nap on the road?” Zoro asks.

I yawn through my hand, “nah, Luffy probably, but I’m not. There’s a lot of shit going on here I’d be more than happy to ignore if it wasn’t for Nami.”

“You’re all out of your minds! Arlong is out to get us, we have to go!” Johnny shouts.

“Now that we know what Nami’s really like there’s no good reason to stay!” Yosaku adds, shooting me a pitying look. “Your theory be damned, Big Bro Ed, I believe what Johnny saw!”

Johnny shakes his head and adjusts his glasses. “I’m afraid this is where we part ways. We have no desire to be hunted down by Arlong!”

“Fine,” Zoro replies from where he’s sat down beside us.

“May we meet again someday!”

“Take care!”

The two of them march down the road, opposite the way Nami ran.

“You too!” Zoro calls back.

_____

Silence reigns for a few minutes.

“Hey Zoro,” I start. The man in question hums. “3,500 berri says Usopp is about to come running down that road, completely fine.”

He shoots me a halfhearted glare. “Really? You don’t think she actually killed him?”

I scoff with a small smile. “Nope. I’ve got all the proof I need right here,” I say, holding up a small bundle of cash. 4,500 berri, to be exact. Zoro raises an eyebrow. “Nami is one of the best pick pockets you’ll ever meet. If she actually gave zero shits about us, she would have taken this from me too. But here I am, with money still to my name. Money she *knew* I had. We slept in the same damn room, it would have been stealing candy from a baby.” I shoot him a smirk, “4,000 berri says my theory on the boat, not that you heard it, is 100% accurate.”

He rolls his eyes. “Without even needing to hear it I’m willing to take that. You can’t be right *all* the time.”

This motherfucker is going to eat his words.

“Do you honestly believe Nami killed Usopp?” Sanji pipes up from where he’s sat under a nearby tree.

Zoro smirks over his shoulder at him. “Who knows? Maybe she got so pissed after I called her small-time she actually did him in.”

Sanji’s entire face twitches.

“Hooh boy…” I mutter, sliding down closer to Luffy, who’s still snoring loudly.

“Small… time!” Sanji roars, furious. Both boys jump up and lunge at each other, just as Usopp comes running up to us with a huge smile on his face.

“Oh thank god! I thought you — AUGH!” His poor face is then crunched between Sanji’s heel and Zoro’s scabbard.

“Eh.”

“Ah…”

“He’s alive!” Sanji exclaims.

“Maybe not anymore…” Zoro looks mortified.

Haha. Loser. Luffy takes this as the perfect moment to snort himself awake from his nap. He takes one look at Usopp and promptly loses his shit. He scrambles right over me in his haste to get to Usopp. “Ough!” I wheeze as a rubber elbow plants itself in my side.

“Usopp! Did Nami do this to you?!”

“Uh no. That was us,” Sanji laughs, sweat dripping down his face.

“You mean you,” Zoro scoffs.

“Luffy, Ed, you’re here now!” Usopp cries.

“Yup. Just dropped in,” I wheeze from the ground.

“I’m here too! Hi there!” Sanji laughs.

Usopp jumps up at him with a glare containing the heat of a thousand suns. “I’ll kill you one of these days!”

“By the way, we kinda heard you were dead. Killed by Nami,” Zoro states.

“I knew he was talking shit!” Luffy shouts.

I roll to my feet at this point, a glare shot at Luffy and a hand rubbing my side. “He was being very insistent.”

“I mean… no? She saved my life,” he declares. I silently smack my hand into Zoro’s chest. He glares at me and passes over 3,500 berri. I smile brightly at him.

I am very much enjoying myself.

“If you ask me, there must be some reason why she joined up with the Arlong Pirates,” Usopp states, arms crossed and brow furrowed.

“Your theory is looking more and more plausible, dearest,” Sanji muses.

“It’s useless,” comes a new voice from behind us, “no matter what you do, Arlong’s rule won't come to an end.”

How many goddamn people are gonna sneak up on us on the same fucking path?

There, stood with a hand cocked on her hip and an impassive look slapped across her face, is Nojiko.

“Who’s she?” Luffy questions, pointing a finger at her.

“Nami’s sister, Nojiko,” Usopp replies, a vexed expression on his face.

“Nami’s sister?! No wonder she’s so beautiful!” Sanji sighs.

“What do you mean useless?” Zoro asks with a raised eyebrow.

Nojiko continues to stare. “Just trust me, don't get yourselves involved in what's happening here. I’ll explain what's going on, so in return I want you to just leave quietly.”

Usopp's eyebrows raise into his hairline. "You can tell us why Nami joined Arlong's group?"

"Yup. And if that doesn't make you want to leave, I don't know what will."

The boys make curious sounds, but Luffy just walks right past her. "I'll pass."

"Huh? Wait!"

"I don't care about her past. I'm going for a walk," he says with a shrug.

"A walk?! You're not gonna listen to this?" Usopp calls.

"No, I'm cool," Luffy calls back.

I sigh, tucking my cash back into my pockets. "I'm going too."

"What? Why?" Usopp asks, more incredulous by the second.

"I've already figured it all out. Besides, I've got an appointment to keep," I glance over my shoulder as I pass Nojiko, "and I've got a place I need to see. Nami's favourite place in the world is here, I owe it a visit."

Nojiko's look of surprise is the last thing I see before I set my head forward and march down the road.

_____

“Excuse me, I’m looking for the tangerine grove. Could you point me in the right direction? It’s urgent,” I ask the first person I see once I reach Cocoyashi Village. The woman, who already looked a little wary of me, gets a defensive look on her face. “I’m not here to break or steal anything. Have the Marines already come through?”

She gives a hesitant nod and I curse under my breath. Fucking Nezumi is already going to be there.

“Change of plans. I need to know where Nami’s house is *now* . That Marine Captain works for Arlong, he’s here to steal all the money she’s gathered, and we have exactly no time to lose,” I say urgently.

That shocks the woman into action. She grabs me by the wrist and starts running through the village, hollering to everyone she passes, “that Marine is working for Arlong! Nami’s in trouble!” By the time we’re starting up the hill to the house there's a small crowd of people marching behind us.

The first clue that we’re nearing our destination is Nami’s voice exclaiming, “what did you say?!”

I immediately pick up my pace, pulling out of the women's grip so I can sprint the last length. “Shit, shit, shit,” I mutter between heaving breaths.

“Search her house!” a skeezy voice yells right as I arrive at the scene. A small horde of Marines, including Captain Nezumi beside a confused looking Genzo, stand outside the house. I can see Nami reaching for her bo staff as Marines approach her door.

“Cease and desist!” I scream, coming to a skidding stop a few feet behind the rat bastard.

The whole group pauses as the Captain turns to me with a raised eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

I pull in a couple heavy breaths. “Cease and desist,” I repeat, hunching over with my hands on my knees.

“The hell—”

“You’re performing an unlawful and unauthorized raid on a civilian home,” I interrupt him, still wheezing between words.

“Uh—”

“I know for a fact it’s unauthorized because on one would authorize a raid in a village so close to Arlong Park,” I continue.

“That’s—”

“Do you have a warrant to search the property?” I ask, finally straightening up. I can see Nami, confused, shocked, and a little angry, stood between the Marines and her front door, and a bewildered and gassed up Captain Nezumi staring at me.

I’m starting to feel more like a lawyer and less like a detective…

He visibly hesitates, wrong footed by his authority being questioned so bluntly. “Well no, but —”

I interrupt him again, a condescending smile slapped on my face. “Do you even have evidence that the berri on this property is stolen?”

“Yes!—”

“Then you shouldn’t have any trouble getting that warrant. Unless you *want* me to call Vice Admiral Garp up right now? I have been meaning to chat with him about his grandson…”

As always, bluffing out of my ass is gonna have to cut it.

“Who are you?!” Captain Nezumi spits, panicked.

I smirk and do a flourish with my hand. “Detective E. D. Domino. I have to say, Captain Nezumi, the things I’ve seen here today have certainly been… enlightening.”

Sweat starts to pour out from under his hat as his face twitches. “Who… exactly do you report to?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Do you want me to start at the top and work down? These aren’t exactly people you can bribe.”

“I wasn’t—”

“That money is for the sake of every resident in Cocoyashi Village! You have no right to take it away!” comes the yell of Genzo, who’s still standing behind Nezumi.

Nami’s face goes white. “Gen… How did you know that..?”

Genzo tilts his pinwheel adorned hat down over his eyes. “I knew all along Nami. Back then, we just couldn’t believe what you’d done, so we forced Nojiko to tell us the truth. Everyone knew all along.” There’s sounds of agreement through the small group that I completely forgot where behind me. “We feared that if you knew we knew, it would pressure you into staying if you ever wanted to run away,” he explains.

“Does that mean all the villagers in this town were abetting a thief?” Nezumi asks, a hint of condescension slipping back into his voice.

“Watch it, rat boy. No one here is taking lip from a guy taking bribes from Arlong,” I snap at him. “Not that he’d actually give you any of the money,” I add with a shrug, “he fucking hates all humans. You included.”

He makes a choked wheeze. “How did — But the 100 million berri…”

Shock ripples through the crowd.

“What…” Nami breathes out, looking at me in dawning horror.

“He’s *what?”* Nojiko’s voice demands as the woman herself pushes through the group, fists on her hips.

Nezumi looks back and forth between the crowd, Nami, Genzo and me, panic melting as his face settles into something cold and uncaring. “Baseless conjecture. As workers of the government we’re only doing our duty and persecuting thieves.”

As all the people around me start yelling in outrage Nezumi spins on his heel and snaps his fingers. “Take them out. They’re interfering with our investigation.” He smirks over his shoulder at me as the Marines pull up their guns. “Sorry detective, hope your superiors weren’t expecting a report anytime soon.”

I see Nami make a move to run past me, Nojiko and Genzo on her heels to stop her. I see the Marines taking aim. My blood runs cold.

Nojiko jumps in front of Nami. I draw my gun. I won’t make it in time.

Always one second too short.

I throw myself into the lot of them, pistol still raised. I shoot.

I don’t see what my bullet connects with.

My shoulder explodes in agony, and I hear Nojiko behind me make a noise of pain.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

lmao

Chapter 17: Chapter Seventeen: The Bullet Hit But Maybe Not

Chapter Summary

The Other Side of Paradise - Glass Animals

For the first few seconds I can't hear anything at all. Just a high pitched ringing and the droning hiss of static.

Chapter Notes

AHAHAAHA GUESS WHO HIT 100,000 WORDS IN THE DRAFT

Also there's some references to racism and discrimination (fantastical and otherwise) in this chapter. Ik guys I'm just loading all this shit out during PRIDE MONTH I'm a DISGRACE I would like to APOLOGIZE.

(No seriously though I didn't plan that it just happened to fall that way lmao)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something they don't tell you about getting shot; it really fucks with your brains processing ability. Like, my ass just got *shot.* And the most important thing to me right now is trying to recall if I locked the door to my house before I died.

That has absolutely no bearing on my life now. I couldn't go back and change it, I couldn't ask my mom to fix it, I couldn't tell her I'm sorry if anything got stolen.

…

The sky is so blue today. Everything seems so blurry, like it's moving in slow motion. A bird circles lazily overhead and the sun burns in the corner of my vision. A stray leaf floats into view and everything suddenly sharpens and snaps into focus.

My vision goes white. My breath catches in my throat as I fall backward. My shoulder meets something solid.

I scream.

For the first few seconds I can't hear anything at all. Just a high pitched ringing and the droning hiss of static.

I am completely oblivious to the world around me. The only thing that exists to me is the searing pain in my shoulder. Who could have guessed getting shot hurts so fucking bad?

Muffled voices leak through my ears like water. Murmurs and shouts, just barely drowned out by someone still screaming. Wait, shit, that's me.

I clamp my teeth together as hard as I can. I can feel hands holding me and a man's voice trying to get through to me. Fuck, where's Nami and Nojiko? Oh god what happened to Nojiko?!

"No—" I cut myself off with a wheeze, "Nojiko?"

A head of orange hair moves into my view. Nami's horrified face looks down at me and Genzo's voice creeps into my ears. "Nojiko is fine! The bullet barely grazed her. Nami, get me a wad of cloth or leather, don't let her bite through her own tongue!"

"Them. They're not a girl," I see Nami say, face frozen and numb.

"Wonderful, now shove something in their mouth!" Genzo impatiently replies.

I open my mouth again to ask, "what—" but Nami takes the opportunity to shove something into my mouth. "Hmmph?!" I muffle through whatever it is, reflexively trying to spit it out.

“This is gonna hurt, brace yourself!” Genzo says. A hand worms into mine, another settling near my injured shoulder. A sudden increase in pressure sends white hot agony through my body like lightning.

My throat tearing scream is muffled by whatever is in my mouth, and it thankfully does save my tongue from being cut clean off by my clenching teeth. The pain boils hotter and hotter, completely unbearable.

And just when I think I can’t handle anything more, I black out.

_____

“Don’t tell me the Marines shot them?!” Is the first thing I hear after breaking through the grip of unconsciousness. I make a low groan and squint open my eyes. The first thing I see is Nojiko’s face above me sagging in relief. “They’re awake!”

“Wha'ppened?” I slur, shifting to try and sit up. Pain races up from my shoulder and I let out another, louder, groan.

“Try not to move, the doctor is gonna take a look at you,” Nokijo says, smiling down at me worriedly.

“Shiiiiiit… Did I get shot?” I mumble, rolling my head back to look around. I notice I’m propped up in Nojiko’s lap, and she has a small amount of blood leaking from her arm too. Genzo is stood behind her, looking around for presumably the doctor.

The small group of civilians that had followed me to Nami’s house has grown in size, and are huddled around us. “Damn, what a crowd. What’s the occasion?” I murmur as the doctor finally comes forward and starts checking out my shoulder.

“You’re still joking at a time like this?” Nami’s voice asks quietly. I lift my head to see her standing above me, just in front of the crowd. Her face is tilted down and her eyes shadowed. I can see her fists shaking.

Ah fuck.

“Hey Nami, What’s up? Need any help?” Luffy’s energetic voice questions as the boy himself pushes through the crowd with a smile on his face. The smile evaporates as Nami furiously grabs him by the collar and he catches sight of me on the ground, probably smeared once again in my own blood.

“Why are you still here?! Why are *both* of you still here?!” Nami shouts, raw emotion making her vocal chords shake. “This has nothing to do with *either* of you! Just get the hell off this island!”

She throws Luffy, who’s staring at me whitefaced, to the ground and takes off in a dead sprint down the road. A few people call after her, but my eyes are locked on my Captains.

“It’s fine,” I say softly. Luffy scrabbles across the ground to me. He hunches over my head, wide dark eyes darting across my face and shoulder. I reach my uninjured arm up to grab him by the face. “It’s fine,” I repeat.

“Who…” he starts.

I shake my head. “It’s fine. I’m fine.” I crack a wry smile, “hey, at least I wasn’t stabbed this time!”

His face cracks, features crunching together and eyes scrunching. “That’s not the point dummy!” he shouts right into my face, “I wasn’t even there this time!”

Oh.

Gotta shut that shit down right now.

“Hah?!” I shout right back at him. He jerks his head back, shock clear on his face. “What happens to me when you’re not around isn’t your fault, dumbass! I make stupid choices that don’t always work out! I’m a fucking idiot so I’m gonna keep getting hurt!”

He opens his mouth to argue as I suck in a breath. I scream, as loud as I can, “YOU DON’T HAVE TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT ME!”

The entire crowd takes a step back, doctor excluded. That dude just keeps wrapping my tender shoulder up.

I take another deep breath. “Luffy,” I start, much softer this time, “my weakness will *never* be your fault. I’m not hurt because you’re not strong enough.”

He tilts his head down to shade his eyes, slowly nodding his head. “I know,” he says, almost inaudible.

“Do you?” I ask, just as quiet. Silence spreads for a few moments, only broken by my hiss as the doctor tightens the bandage.

“You got off pretty lucky. Bullet went right through and missed all the important shit, probably why poor Nojiko got banged up too. You'll be fine,” the doctor says gruffly, slapping another roll of bandages into my hand, then rocking back on his heels and moving on to patching up Nojiko.

“See? Just fine,” I murmur.

Oddly enough, getting honest to god shot hurts almost *less* than being smacked by a lion. The real question is whether that has more to do with me getting a higher pain tolerance, or some

weird… assimilation with this world's healing rate. I don't fucking know.

I flick the brim of Luffys hat up so I can see his face. Big watery black eyes stare back at mine. "I'm glad you're worried about me, it's nice to know you care. But if you stop to pity me every time I get hurt we'll never make it to the end of the Grand Line."

His face pinches up. "Okay. Sorry. I'll care, uh — quieter?"

I snort, then pull his head closer to press a sound kiss to his forehead. "Be as loud as you damn well please, Captain. Now go take care of Nami, and I'll take care of myself."

"If nothing else, you gave as good as you got," Genzo pipes up from behind us. "Caught that Marine bastard right in the side. You're a pretty good shot, kid."

I can't help the full body laugh that rumbles through me. "Ha! You hear that? I'm getting better!"

A big smile creeps up Luffy's face, the last vestiges of his melancholy draining away. "Of course you're getting better," he states, getting to his feet.

The same woman that had led me to Nami's house earlier comes up to my side and helps me to my feet. "My home is right here, you can rest for a bit while we get everything sorted," she says with a warm smile, guiding me through the door. I throw my head back over my shoulder to give Luffy a wink and a thumbs up before the door is shut behind me.

She helps me get situated on a plush couch, pulling an afghan draped on the back of it over my lap. "I'd like to suggest you take a nap while you can, but you don't seem like that kind of person," she says, walking through an open door to what I presume is the kitchen. The sound of running water confirms my suspicion. "So instead I just ask that you take as long as you need to adjust. I have the feeling things are coming to a head out there, so if I don't come back, please feel free to leave the island."

She wanders back to the couch and hands me a glass of water. I stare up at her, mouth agape. “What is it?” she asks, head tilted in confusion.

I shake my head. “Sorry, it’s just… you’re very kind, to be helping me like this. And hearing you talk so nonchalantly about your own death is a little… disconcerting.”

She chuckles softly. “Don’t you worry about that. The bathroom is the first door on the right down that hall, the one across from it is mine. If you need a change of clothes please take anything.”

“That does it! Arm yourselves, it’s time to fight!” comes a muffled yell from outside.

The woman sighs, grabbing a kitchen knife as she walks to the door. “Here we go. You stay safe now.”

“Thank you!” I call as she walks out the door, she flashes me a smile and shuts it behind her.

I sit in silence, listening to the muffled yelling and rallying cries outside.

“Shit,” I whisper.

_____

It’s some time later when I finally get up. The yelling has completely died down, there’s no more harsh footfalls or clanging of weapons. I fold up the woman's afghan, making sure I didn’t leave blood stains on it, and make my way outside.

The streets are abandoned, save for Nami crouched on the ground clutching Luffy’s straw hat to her head. I quietly pad up behind her.

“They all go to fight Arlong, then?” I ask. She visibly jumps, neck craning to stare back at me. Tears are still wet on her face, skin red and splotchy. She slowly nods. “Hm. How's your shoulder?” I don’t even have to ask. The skin is fucking shredded, deep gouges mar the skin all over her former tattoo.

“How’s yours?” she shoots back with none of the usual heat.

I snort. “Just fine.”

We stay silent for a few moments, Nami thumbing the brim of Luffy’s hat and staring holes into the ground. “I thought Luffy didn’t let anyone touch his straw hat,” she says, still looking at the ground. “Except maybe you,” she adds.

I snort quietly. “Hah. You’ve seen firsthand what kind of guy he is, why do you think you’re wearing it?”

Nami pauses. “I don’t know,” she settles on.

I gently place my hand on the back of her neck. She ever so slightly leans back into the touch. “Right now you’re holding his treasure while he’s getting yours back,” I smile, “you don’t have to worry, he’ll take the overgrown guppy down just like any other foe.” Nami doesn’t answer, she just tightens her grip on the hat. Then she murmurs something inaudible. “Hm?”

“Bandages. Do you have more bandages?” she repeats, jumping to her feet and spinning on me.

I blink. She stares back with an expression of fierce determination. I silently hold up the extra roll of bandages the doctor had given me. She snatches it out of my hand and starts poorly trying to wrap up her own shoulder.

“Let me,” I take them back from her shaking hands, wrapping her up to the best of my ability.

“I’ve already cried and complained enough. Everyone else is already fighting, I’ve decided I have to as well!” she says, determination leaking out of her every pore.

“Got it, I’ll have your back,” I state. She sends me a grateful smile that I return with a small smirk, “and I promise I won’t get shot doing it this time.”

She barks out a laugh as we start to run the direction of Arlong Park.

_____

“You should just die. It’s not like your lives are actually worth anything,” a voice like tumbling salt rocks intones as we reach the back of the crowd outside Arlong Park. As the people part, Nami stalks forward, me on her heels with my pistol drawn.

Not that it’ll be much use against a goddamn Fishman.

I can see the bruised, beaten, bloody bodies of Sanji and Zoro at the feet of Arlong. And may I just say, WHAT THE FUCK. Look, saying ‘shark Fishman’ is one thing, but seeing this motherfucker up close… BRO. SCARY.

“ARLONG!” Nami screams.

The Fishman turns to regard us. “Nami. Great timing, I was just about to kill these pirates. What brings you here?”

She glares him down. “I’m here to kill you.”

Arlong lets out a rancorous laugh. “Kill me? Shahaha! How many times have you tried to kill me in the past eight years..? Assassination, poison, sneak attacks… But did you ever succeed?! Shouldn't you know by now mere humans can’t kill me?!”

Wow this guy's superiority complex is off the goddamn charts.

“I’m not going to kill you. You’ll remain my cartographer forever,” he muses. Nami tenses even more at my side. “But you know I’m a stand up guy… so I’d rather you be my cartographer of your own free will. So how’s this, I kill every single living thing on this island but you. But…”

Nami’s hand shoots out and grabs onto mine in a vice grip. I hold it back just as tight. I really hope she can’t feel how hard I’m shaking.

“If you agree to join the Arlong Pirates and keep drawing maps as one of my officers, I’ll spare the residents of Cocoyashi Village. I can’t say the same for these guys though… they’ve pissed me off too much,” he says, kicking Sanji’s limp body. “There’s only one question… who are you going to side with?” He grins his wide shark toothed grin, “tell me Nami, are you with me? Or with them..?”

The space between our clenched palms is slick with sweat. Nami is heaving for breath. The villagers are shouting around us. I squeeze Nami’s hand. She looks at me. I give her a solid nod and smile. Her eyes turn glossy. She spins around to regard the villagers.

“Sorry everyone!” she shouts. The crowd pauses. “Please die with me!”

They all immediately explode in cheers. “Alright!”

“I see… so you all choose to die…” Arlong mutters.

A huge spout of water shoots up just outside the gates. “Big Bro Luffy is alive!” Johnny cries from beside us.

Zoro struggles to his feet, using his swords to leverage himself. “30 seconds! That’s all I got!” he says, voice hoarse and wet.

“That'll be enough!” Sanji answers, kicking off his shoes and diving into the water in one fluid movement.

As Arlong makes a move to follow Zoro swings out with one of Johnny or Yosaku’s swords. “Don’t worry about that. It’s nothing at all, you half-fish mutant!” he spits.

Arlong glares and licks the blood off his face. “Didn’t I tell you not to call me that, Roronoa Zoro?”

I slide my hand out of Nami’s, level my pistol and shoot twice. Arlong dodges the bullets with a simple tilt of his head. “You gonna say no to some range support, Zoro?” I call over.

He sends me a shaky smirk. “Nope, fire at will!”

“There’s still more of you?” Arlong sneers. Then a fucking egg shoots past my head that he deflects with a flick of a finger.

“I’m also here!” Usopp calls, half crouched behind the shattered wall. He grins a manic smile over at us, “Nami, Ed! I took down one of their officers by myself! Ha!”

I give him a matching smile. “Great job, sweetheart!” Nami lets out a laugh of pure disbelief.

“30 seconds, right?” I yell to Zoro. He gives me an exhausted nod. “Wonderful, I can talk for that long!” I take a few steps forward. Not many mind you, I’m not getting closer to this psycho than I have to. “Hey, Arlong!” I shout. He regards me as one would a worm. Ouch. “You’re a huge asshole!” Every single person in my vicinity chokes. “You’re a money-grubbing materialistic dick faced cunt bag and a disgrace to that mark you wear!”

That’s enough to draw his ire solely on me. “What did you say?!” he growls.

“You fucking heard me! How *dare* you wear a symbol like that while doing the things you’ve done here!”

Maybe if I rant at him long enough Luffy will show up and save us. Yeah. That'll work. I do notice Hatchan slip into the water behind Arlong, but that’ll take care of itself thanks to the wounds Zoro inflicted on him earlier.

“A lowly human dares to lecture me on things it doesn’t understand?” he grits, voice like gravel rolling with fury.

“Fuck right off! You think just because I’m human I can’t understand you? Newsflash motherfucker, hate is universal!” There’s silence from the crowd as I go off. I lower my voice from a yell to just being firm. “There’s a lot of discrimination where I’m from. And what I’ve learned is that people will use almost anything to ‘other’ a group of people.”

I count off on my fingers, the movement jostling my shoulder. “Race, religion, gender, sexuality, wealth, anything. It comes to a point where you realize people don’t even hate you for what they say they do. They just do it because they can.” I can’t keep the bitterness out of my voice. “People are… predictable. *Stupid* . Prideful and obtuse,” I soften my eyes for my crewmates, “but they’re also kind. And gentle, and understanding. They’re very easy to love. That’s about all I need to know about them.”

The moment is shattered by Arlongs slow clap. “Wonderful speech, truly. But even still, it remains that a worm like you could never understand what it means to be a Fishman, to be superior in every way but still treated as monsters!”

My expression flattens out. “Guess there’s no getting through to you.” I fire another shot that he once again dodges.

“Fine! You want to fight me, so you shall!” he roars, charging towards me with his fist raised.

I’m thankfully saved by Zoro diverting his blow with a strike of his own. “I’m your opponent too! Don’t forget about me!” he yells hoarsely.

“Thanks buddy!” I call, firing another bullet that is also dodged. This is getting old.

That’s uuuuh four bullets down? Yeah. Three shots left.

Another of those shots is wasted as I fire while Zoro ducks for a swipe at his legs. “Balls! Zoro, hun, can you get me an opening?”

He replies with a wordless yell and, “I’m fucking trying!”

I throw my free hand up. “You don’t have to be such a bitch about it, Jesus!”

Two left.

“I got you!” yells Usopp, a couple pellets firing past me in close succession. Some kind of smoke bomb and something that goes off like a sparkler. As Arlongs face emerges from the smoke like something straight out of Jaws I shoot again. The bullet bounces uselessly off his crazy nose.

“Fuck!” I shout out of frustration.

One shot left, make that shit count!

Zoro takes my move as a cue to try and slice off his nose, it predictably doesn't work. Arlong grabs him by the neck and hoists him into the air. “What's with all the bandages?” he sneers. Zoro mumbles something inaudible. “Hah? What was that?”

“ED! SHOOT!” Zoro roars, stabbing one of his swords into Arlongs forearm to hold him in place. As he makes a shout of pain I race forward and level my pistol up at his face, almost point blank.

Can’t miss this time.

“Eat shit and live,” I growl. I fire my pistol.

Nothing comes out.

…

“Crap.”

Chapter End Notes

Hehe.

Had to do it to 'em.

Look we all knew Ed was gonna make a stupid ass mistake like this eventually—

Chapter 18: Chapter Eighteen: Should I Keep It Light, Stay Out Of The Fight?

Chapter Summary

Burn the House Down - AJR

“Was… that 30 — seconds..?” I gasp through the choking.

Chapter Notes

This one is for all those who wanted Ed to take a dip in the water for scientific purposes.

And an end to Arlong Park arc!

WE'RE ALMOST OUT OF THE EAST BLUE ALMOST ALMOST—

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’m seized at the neck by Arlong’s free hand. I choke out a gasp as I’m lifted a few feet off the ground.

“What was that? Eat shit and live? Sorry human, I think it’s better if you just die right here,” he hisses, sharp teeth bared and eyes wild.

Oh my god I forgot about the bullet I fired at Nezumi—

That blunder is going to cost me my worthless goddamn life. I can hear shouts of my name from Nami and Usopp, and a gurgling cough from Zoro.

“Was… that 30 — seconds..?” I gasp through the choking.

Zoro sends me as much of a smirk as he can. “Yup.”

All our prayers are answered in the form of Luffy hollering, “I’M BACK!” as loud as he can behind us. There’s vigorous cheers from the crowd and calls of his name.

“So damn late, moron…” Zoro gargles out.

“Zoro! Ed! Switch with me!”

What?

OH *FUCK!*

A rubbery hand latches onto the back of my shirt and I grab onto Arlongs hand for dear life. I send panicked eyes at Zoro, who is looking at me with the same dawning horror.

“Don’t you daAAREE!” we both yell as we’re slingshotted into the air.

We’re flying at breakneck speeds, screaming all the while. I’m flailing my arms around to try and grab onto Zoro in any way I can, but as the ocean approaches closer and closer I fear I won’t be able to find him in time.

My fingers snag on wet cloth. I grip onto it and pull with all my might. Zoro’s body slams into mine and I grapple my arms around him tightly. I can feel his arms come up to do the same. “THIS IS GONNA SUCK!” I scream.

“NO SHIT!” he screams back.

Do you have any idea how hard it is to manoeuvre in the air while attached to another person *without the use of your arms?*

I'll spare you the brainpower. It's very fucking hard. I somehow by the grace of god manage to manoeuvre us so we're plummeting head first. If this cracks my skull open for a second time I'm gonna be *so* pissed.

"I'LL PADDLE, JUST HANG ON TIGHT!" I shout to Zoro, though the chance he can hear me over the rush of wind is slim.

We slam into the water with all the force of one of Luffy's punches.

I immediately start swinging my arms through the stinging pain. It feels like someone's thrust a hot poker through my shoulder but I just keep paddling. With a kick of my feet we break the surface.

Zoro's arms are tight over my shoulders and his breath is ragged against my collarbones. We only missed the ledge of the gates by a scant 20 feet, so I start the painstaking swim over there.

"I've got you, I've got this…" I mumble.

For the sake of brevity I'll spare you all the details, but have you ever seen someone trying to save a drowning dog? Yeah. That. This heavy ass motherfucker is *soooo* lucky I'm a bomb ass swimmer.

Once we're up on the rocky ledge I twist Zoro onto his stomach as he starts hacking up water and blood. "Fuck — *hack* that guy."

"Yup. Fuck that guy," I agree through heaving breaths, my hand coming up to wipe salt water from my face.

But hey, we're alive. That's what matters.

"See," Zoro starts, blood still dripping from his lips, "you'd make a great mermaid."

I groan and roll onto my back, clutching at my burning shoulder. "Damn straight."

We just kinda lay there for a while, no sounds from either of us but wheezing breath and the occasional cough.

"That's gonna happen a lot isn't it."

"Yup."

"Fuck."

"Fuck."

The silence returns. I break it with a wheezing laugh. "I hope your money dries fine, since you owe me 4,000 berri now."

He lets out a long drawn out groan. There's loud successive crashing from the other side of the wall.

"The fuck is going on over there?" Zoro mumbles into the ground.

"Luffy's probably tearing down Arlong Park," I answer, sitting up into a criss-cross position.

“Of course he is,” Zoro wheezes. I look up and spot a stray chunk of rubble divert to start flying in our direction.

“You’re gonna wanna roll to your left,” I announce, scooching away from Zoro.

He makes a tired and confused noise, raising his head just in time for the debris to smack him in the face. “Fuck!” he yells.

“Told you,” I snort, rising to my feet and tugging on his arms. He slowly and painfully stands upright, blood still running down his stitched up chest in rivulets. “Ok let's go, you big sack of meat.”

“The fuck d’you call me?”

“NAMI! YOU’RE MY FRIEND! GOT IT?!” Luffy’s voice screams as we round the wall. We can see Arlong Park, now nothing but a pile of rubble, and the crowd of Cocoyashi Villagers clamouring and cheering, some tossing Luffy into the air while chanting his name.

“Aw, that's nice,” I smile.

“That’s enough celebrating!” comes a familiar and extremely annoying voice.

My smile evaporates.

This ***bitch*** .

Captain Nezumi, flanked by a whole squad of gun toting Marines, slowly strolls up to the crowd. He’s now sporting a large bandage wrapped around his middle, and looks a little paler than when I saw him earlier.

“What a lucky day today is. It truly was an excellent battle. I can only assume your victory was some sort of bizarre miracle,” as his annoying ass goes on and on, me and Zoro stalk up behind him and his little group.“I, Captain Nezumi of the 16th branch, shall hereby take credit for your victory!”

“Take *this* , you rat bastard!” I holler, driving my foot into the small of his back. He goes toppling down with a high pitched scream, knocking his teeth off the pavement.

There’s sounds of violence as Zoro unleashes some frustration on the surrounding Marines. I leer down at Nezumi, who twists his head back to look at me in unabashed horror. “Hey there! Sorry, I just had to come say hi again. You know, after you *shot me last time!”*

I ignore the noises of outrage around me as I wind back my leg and crack it right in between his. He makes a choked wheeze, face going even paler. “I’m understandably a little upset about it,” I hiss through my teeth.

“Y — You!” he screeches, pulling the classic sibling manoeuvre of kicking his legs up to try and keep me away.

I grin a manic and slightly deranged smile at him. “Me! Now I suggest you either walk away, or *never walk again!”*

He makes a whimper of fear, scrabbling back on his hands. “Ah! I’m — That is.. uH—!” He reaches behind himself and brandishes a pistol faster than I can stop, but before his crazy ass can fire it Nami comes in with a solid crack to the skull via bo staff.

“That’s for shooting Nojiko,” she strikes him across the face a second time, “that’s for trespassing on Bellemere’s tangerine grove,” and a final thwack sends him flying with a holler of, “and that one’s for shooting Ed!”

Nami stalks after him and starts lecturing him. I swipe a finger under my nose and smirk. “Ah, that felt good. Who coulda guessed the best cure for a bullet wound was violence

enacted in your name?"

"I'm sorry, bullet wound?" Usopp mutters to the side.

"Mark my words you rotten pirates! Luffy is your Captain, right?! You and that evil detective will pay for this! You'll get just what you deserve!" the rat bastard wails as he frantically swims away from what was previously Arlong Park.

"What you deserve?" Sanji parrots with a raised eyebrow.

"How'd he know I deserve to be King of the Pirates?" Luffy asks, adjusting his returned straw hat on his head.

"That's not what he means dumbass," Zoro sighs.

"Are we in super big trouble or what?!" Usopp screeches.

I blink back tears. "He said I was evil! I'm so happy!"

Usopp gets uncomfortably close to my face. *"What is wrong with you?!"*

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Do you want me to start with the gunshot wound or list my mental illnesses?"

"Hey everyone! Now isn't the time to keep this to ourselves, we gotta tell everyone on the island what happened!" someone in the crowd yells, then the whole group starts moving out in a burst of cheers and whoops.

Luffy swings a bloody, tooth-marked arm over my uninjured shoulder. I lean into it with a sigh.

“We all really need medical attention.”

_____

After getting patched up (again) I’m sent outside so the doctor can focus on Zoro. I drop down beside Sanji and Usopp.

“What a day.”

“No kidding.”

We sit in a silence punctuated by Zoro’s screams from inside.

“So, you got shot?” Usopp asks with absolutely no tact.

Sanji looks ready to throttle him but I just snort. “Yup! Well actually I jumped in front of a moving bullet voluntarily. Admittedly not my best thought out plan, but what can you do?”

Sanji leans toward me, stars in his eyes. “Oh you’re so brave, dear! If only I could have taken the bullet for you!”

I smack him on the knee with a smile. “How about we all avoid getting shot again.”

“Wonderful idea.”

“Sounds good.”

“Glad we’re in agreement.”

_____

Look, you can read ‘partied for three days straight’ and think ‘wow what a rager!’ all you want, actually living that? Fucking *exhausting* . The party happens to me in flashes.

_____

“I don’t drink alcohol,” I mutter to myself, swishing around the cup of ale or something Zoro had passed me at some point. I shrug my good shoulder, “when in Rome,” and throw it back.

I’m immediately reminded *why* I don’t drink alcohol. *It tastes like shit.* I try my best not to vomit all over myself. It’s not very pleasant.

I shove the drink back into Zoro’s hands. “Abso-fucking-lutely not.”

_____

“So how do you know Vice Admiral Garp?” Nojiko asks me.

I shove another slab of ham into my mouth. “Oh I’ve never met the man.”

Her eyebrows fly into her hairline. “You were bluffing?!”

I raise a single eyebrow back. “Of course I was. I don’t know anyone in the government personally besides a couple snot nosed brats.”

She shakes her head in disbelief. “Well you totally had me fooled, probably that Captain too. Wonder if he’ll check with his superiors before trying to get his revenge on you.”

I laugh through yet another slice of ham. “I’d love to see that!”

“Ok I think you’ve had enough ham, the entire platter is gone!”

_____

I’m having a riveting conversation with Usopp about the finer applications of hot sauce when I feel someone staring at me. I turn around and catch a glimpse of a man with scraggly brown hair pointing a camera at me. I raise an eyebrow and toss up a peace sign.

There’s a small flash from the camera and the man, now nervous at being spotted, gives me a thumbs up before disappearing into the crowd.

“...Weird,” I mutter to myself, turning back to Usopp and putting it out of my mind.

_____

I plop down next to Sanji in an empty alley, a plate of some kind of orange pie balanced in my lap. “I want you to remember this forever,” I sigh softly.

He gives me a smile and tilts his head. “Remember what? The party?”

I shake my head with a smile. “Us going to war for one of our own.” The surprise in his eye is quickly replaced by indignation as I shove a forkful of pie in his mouth. “This is fucking delicious, try it.”

As he’s chewing through that I continue talking. “What we just did for Nami was priceless to her, but to us it was just common sense right?” He furrows his brow and nods slowly, still chewing the pie. “That’s what we do. As crewmates we’ll always have each other’s backs.” I give him a long soul piercing stare. “That goes for you too, without question. No matter who the enemy or their army, we will *always* go to war for one of our own. Do you understand me?”

His expression shutters off. He gulps down the rest of the pie. “I’m sure I don’t—”

“Sanji,” I interrupt, softly taking one of his hands. “I’m not going to ask you anything about your past or the demons that clearly still haunt you. I just want you to keep what I said in mind.”

He stays silent for a beat. “Ok,” he says quietly, squeezing my hand. “Ok, I understand.”

I give him a bright beaming smile, smack a kiss onto his cheek, shove the rest of the pie in his mouth and scamper out of the alley.

“Love you enjoy the party bye!” I holler over my shoulder. There’s loud hacking and choking noises from the alley that I ignore.

———

I get pulled into a dance by Yosaku, who really doesn't know what he’s getting himself into. I use the combined prowess of four years of dance classes to turn that poor fucker on his head. I send him spinning out of my arms and he goes crashing into Johnny.

My loud laughter is interrupted by a wad of cash smacking me in the face.

“Stop laughing you hyena!” Zoro shouts.

I immediately grab him by his still outstretched arm and pull him onto the dance floor, a challenging grin plastered on my face. “Make me, Listerine!”

“WHAT EVEN *IS* THAT?!”

_____

I see the camera guy again some time later. This time I see him snap a picture of Luffy who’s waving to the camera with a big grin. “Didn’t know Cocoyashi had paparazzi…” I mutter to myself, then shrug and go back to eating.

_____

“Ed!” Nami laughs, crashing into me at a buffet table.

“Nami!” I cheer back, wrapping my uninjured arm around her. I take a peek at her bandaged shoulder. “New ink?” I ask, wiggling my eyebrows.

She laughs again and gives me a soft but bright smile. “Figured I deserved something permanent that I actually liked.”

I soften my face and grab hers in my hands, pressing a firm kiss into her temple. “Damn right. I’m *so* fucking proud of you,” I mumble into her skin.

Her arms tighten around me and she smooshes her face into the crook of my neck. “Don’t you dare make me cry at this party,” she threatens. I laugh and rest my chin on the crown of her head.

“...Ed,” she mumbles. I hum. “You took a bullet for me and my sister.”

I smile. “Yeah. Guess I did.” There’s nothing but the sound of musicians and chatter around us for a moment. “...I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” I murmur, cheek pressed firmly to her skull.

“Thank you,” she says, almost inaudible over the din of the party. I probably wouldn’t have even known she said anything if not for the vibration of her voice on my collarbone.

“You never have to thank me for protecting you,” I respond, “I’m your First Mate, and more importantly your *friend.* I’ll spend the rest of my life standing in between you and danger if I have to.” For some reason that gets a snort out of Nami. “What?”

She snorts again, shoulders shaking under my grip. “You dumbass! You’re one hell of a friend, you know that?” she says between giggles. I start laughing too.

“Only the best, dearest!” I croon. Both of us start laughing louder. The people around us are starting to stare at our display. “Nami we’re making a *scene!”* I wheeze.

She starts smacking her hands into my back. *“Stop talking!”* she gasps, cackles clawing out of her throat.

I smother another wheeze into her hair. “I fucking love you!”

She smacks her forehead into my collarbone. “Yeah, I love you too!” she wheezes back.

_____

“Hey kid, where did you learn how to shoot?” Genzo asks me while I’m in the middle of inhaling a whole tray of raw ham melon.

“Didn’t,” I reply through the chewing.

He cranes his neck like he can’t hear me. “What was that?”

“I never learned how to shoot. I stole this weeks ago and have just been doing whatever the hell works,” I say nonchalantly.

His eye twitches. “...have you ever even cleaned it..?”

I laugh. “Nope! I only learned how to reload the thing when we met Usopp!”

I’m pulled away from the table and dragged out of the celebration by Genzo, who's blowing smoke out of his ears. “I’m going to cram all the knowledge of gun maintenance into your skull in three hours or I’ll die trying!”

———

“Hey Genzo, do you guys have a Transponder Snail somewhere on the island?” I ask, securing my new gun holster to my belt.

The man in question puts down the powder horn he was showing me to scratch at his chin. “I think there might be one in the old sheriff's office… hasn’t seen any use since before Arlong though. I hope the poor thing is still alive.”

I nod. “You think we could make a stop there on our way back to the party?”

“Sure thing, but what do you want with it?” he asks with a curious tilt of his head.

I give him a cheeky smile. “If Nami does decide to come with us I’m sure she’d appreciate still getting to talk to you, not to mention I’ll probably end up breaking my gun at some point and need instructions on how to fix it.”

He shrugs. “Fair enough, let’s hope the old girl is still kicking.”

_____

The three days straight of partying comes to a peaceful end with all of us dropping like flies. I end up passing out under a table curled up with Luffy. The last thing I hear is Usopp’s unending singing finally coming to a close as he falls to the ground asleep.

_____

We’ve finished hauling all our supplies onto the ship by the time Johnny and Yosaku call up to us.

“We can’t thank you guys enough, but we have to go back to our jobs as bounty hunters!”

“We look forward to meeting you guys again in the future!”

“See you around,” Zoro calls back.

I just shake my fist at them with a grin. “Don’t you try to collect the bounties we’ll inevitably amass!”

The pair of them strike their matching poses and in unison shout, “whatever you say, Big Bro!”

“Time for us to get going too!” Usopp declares.

“What? We have to wait for Nami!” Sanji shouts.

“Maybe she’s not coming?” Zoro mutters. Sanji whips his head around to him with his teeth bared.

“Hey! That raw ham melon you were talking about wasn’t anywhere!” Luffy yells.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Really? I had some, it was delicious.”

He looks at me with a face of pure betrayal. “What..?”

“SET SAIL!” Nami’s voice hollers from down the road away from the boat. We all turn to see her take off in a dead sprint towards us.

“What’s she doing?” Usopp question.

“She said set sail, so let’s set sail,” Luffy answers.

“Don’t let her leave! She’s planning on going without saying goodbye!” Genzo yells. I watch her bob and weave through the crowd as the boys start prepping the ship around me. I can’t help bursting into unrestrained laughter.

She uses her running start to launch herself onto the moving ship in one gigantic leap. Nami makes a graceful landing and turns her back to the shore. She then lifts her shirt and a literal

mountain of wallets cascade out of her shirt. She looks over her shoulder at the shrinking coast, kisses a bill and winks. “Take care everyone!”

“She hasn't changed one bit,” Usopp frowns.

“I’d watch my back,” Zoro mutters.

“Good job Nami!” Sanji awes.

Both me and Luffy burst into even more hysterical laughter. There’s lots of yelling from the crowd as we retreat further into the water.

“Hey kid! Don’t forget about our promise!” Genzo yells to Luffy, he throws out a thumbs up.

“Goodbye everyone! I’ll be off now!” Nami screams, a huge smile on her face.

_____

“When did we get a bed in the girls room?”

…

“Wait when the fuck did we get a goddamn bar?! ***NAMI!”***

_____

It’s a few days later when we get the big news.

“Another price increase? Raise your prices again and I’ll stop buying your papers!” Nami yells at a News Coo, tossing it a 100 berri coin.

“Hey now, the bird is just doing his job. Don’t take it out on him,” I grouse, counting through the bills I’ve started amassing.

Somehow, through the act of scamming Zoro and scamming Zoro alone, I’ve managed to attain a total of 12,000 berri. Nice.

Also, by some mindfuck of a miracle, after less than a week my gunshot wound has completely healed. Which is fucking ridiculous, but I’m not complaining.

“All the little expenses add up!” Nami throws her hands up.

“I thought you were done saving up money?” Usopp asks from his spot on the floor.

She scoffs in response. “Don’t be stupid. I’m saving money for *me* now. I’m not gonna be a penniless pirate!”

“Ok, ok. Stay back, will ya? I’m in the middle of developing my special Tabasco Star! A face full of this will make any bad guy—” Usopp is cut off by Luffy crashing into him, splashing all of the hot sauce directly into his eyes.

As he starts screaming Luffy yells up at Sanji, who threw him, “come on! I just want one!”

“Absolutely not! This is Nami’s tangerine orchard! I won't let anyone lay a single finger on it!” he shouts, then turns to Nami with a love struck expression, “Nami! Do you see how well I’m protecting your trees?!”

Nami smirks down at her paper. “Thanks a lot, Sanji!”

Luffy scrunches his nose up at them before settling back into a smile. “Fine. I’m in a good mood, so I'll let it go.”

Nami flips the page of her paper and a poster floats out. We all stare at it in silence for a second.

Luffy’s grinning face stares back.

“...That was fast.”

Then everyone starts screaming.

Chapter End Notes

Me dropping plot like bombs and the most obtuse hints I possibly can knowing damn well some of this shit is being entirely missed and the rest is entirely too obvious.

Y'all ready for Loguetown..?

Chapter 19: Chapter Nineteen: I Printed Him A Letter To Be Sent Out To Sea

Chapter Summary

Hold It In - Jukebox the Ghost

“Ok, if you see a tall white haired half naked guy smoking a minimum of two cigars at once tell him I think he’s cool,” I blurt out.

Chapter Notes

I always thought it was pronounced LOWGUEtown but the anime pronounces it LOGtown and I feel crazy.

Also I had a horrible thought at work this week.
Ed, who has never so much as heard of the Titan submersible, seeing the Polar Tang for the first time: “Why do I hear boss music?”

(Future message from the Big Edit™, tell me why it took me until now to realize I got the lyrics in the title wrong. I swear to god they fucking CHANGED IT I got MANDELA EFFECTED it was *WRITTEN* BEFORE — So I changed it and it's right now because it wouldn't bother anyone else but it would bother me.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’re wanted criminals now! It says 30 million!” Luffy laughs.

I stare long and hard at the picture. “For some reason this angle looks familiar..?” And I don’t mean just because I know the poster already, something about the pose…

“Look! My picture is in here!” Usopp cries, pointing to his turned head in the picture.

“It’s just the back of your head, that barely counts!” Sanji pouts.

Usopp makes a smug face. “Don't be jealous, I’m sure we’ll all get them as we get more famous!”

“Once again you idiots fail to understand the gravity of our situation… You do realize this means our lives are at risk?!” Nami groans, rubbing a hand down the side of her face. “We can’t afford to just relax in the East Blue.”

“Alright! Let’s head straight for the Grand Line!” Luffy hollers, swinging an arm around my shoulders and shaking me around.

Sanji and Usopp mirror our pose as we all start cheering, “aye aye!”

“Hey, I see land up ahead,” Zoro calls from the front of the ship.

“You do..?” Nami questions, walking up for a closer look. “That island is the proof we’re closing in on the Grand Line!” she announces. “That island is home of the famous Loguetown! It’s also called the town of the Beginning and the End,” she explains.

I cut in with a snap of my fingers. “It’s also the birth and death place of the previous King of the Pirates.”

“So that’s the town the Pirate King died at…” Luffy mutters.

“Yup. Shall we go?” Nami smiles.

My eyes bug out. “Oh shit! We’re already at *Loguetown!”* I jump out from under Luffy’s arm and start scrambling towards the hatch.

“What’s up?” Nami calls as I throw it open.

“I forgot I really have to do something before we get there!” I yell, dropping down and slamming the door behind me. I hop through the boys mess and scuttle through the emergency exit connecting the two cabins.

I rip open the bottom drawers of the armoire, which I had moved all my shit to when Nami replaced our goddamn couch with a bed *without telling me,* and pull out my draft of the letter for Sabo. I’ve got maybe half an hour to polish this thing up, better get to work.

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After twenty minutes I have down what I think is the best I’m gonna get. It reads as follows:

Hey Sabo,

First things first, don’t try to figure out who I am you little shit.

Basically, I know what happened to you. You probably wanna sit down for this one sweet cheeks, you might get a little faint. Anyways, straight to the point.

You’re from Dawn Island, the Goa Kingdom specifically. You were born noble but your family sucked ass so you ran away, met this asshole kid named Ace and another kid named Luffy and some shit happened and the three of you swore brotherhood on sake. More shit happened then you got blown up by a Celestial Dragon.

That should be enough to kickstart your memory, hopefully.

Now then, I need you to get in contact with the Whitebeard pirates so you can help them get Ace’s stupid ass under control. He’s off to murder this guy who should totally be murdered but that idiot can’t do it alone. At the very least keep in contact with him? They probably have his Transponder number, let him know you’re alive.

Also attached is a Transponder number you may only call for EMERGENCIES. Like Ace is dying or caught by the Marines or Whitebeard has suddenly died of liver failure or Dragon wants to start a nuclear war. Don't ask the person on the other side of the line about this either. Matter of fact, don't tell anyone how you got back your memories.

Dragon will probably figure it out because he's cool like that, and Koala might be there when you read this… whatever. Just keep it to a minimum. And don't tell your brothers! Just say you got conked on the head on a mission or some shit. I don't care.

So have fun with that, make sure he doesn't run headfirst into death!

Bye love,

An interested party.

If nothing else it'll get him curious as to what the hell is going on, right?

With that out of the way, it's on to my next order of business. Shopping. I wanna get a bunch of shit that'll help during our first leg of travel in the Grand Line, and I want to buy that before everything goes to shit in Loguetown.

I wonder…

I go back to the drawers and withdraw my wallet.

If I can somehow scam a bank into converting my cash into berri I'll probably be set… How much do I even have in here?

I crack it open and pull out a stack of bills.

WHAT THE FUCK? WAS I WALKING AROUND WITH $700 IN *CASH?!*

It's like I was asking to get robbed! If someone stole this off my corpse I'll be so fucking mad. Wait, did I even have a corpse? I have all my shit so does it just exist in two places? This is making my brain hurt…

Well as horrible as that could have turned out, I'm thankful past me was kind of an idiot. Now I've just got to use my endless amounts of rizz to make a bank teller convert this shit. Good thing scamming people is apparently one of my specialties.

"Ed! We're making landfall!" Usopp yells from above me.

I curse under my breath, sticking the letter in an envelope, writing 'For Sabo' on it in the most horrific chicken scratch I've ever accidentally created, and sticking it in one of my many pockets along with my wallet.

I join my fellow seafarers up on deck and look out at the city. This place is pretty big and kinda confusing looking… sure hope I can find everything I'm looking for.

"Ok, if you see a tall white haired half naked guy smoking a *minimum* of two cigars at once tell him I think he's cool," I blurt out.

Everyone turns to me with varying levels of bewilderment and trepidation. "What—"

"Ok got it! I'm gonna go check out the execution platform!" Luffy interrupts, jumping down from the ship onto the dock and taking off down the road.

"Luffy, wait! We didn't pick a meeting place..!" Nami yells after him. She turns to me with an exhausted look. "What are we gonna do with him?"

“Don’t know, I’m going out too! Nobody die while I’m gone!” I holler, sliding down the rope ladder with an amount of finesse I didn’t know I possessed.

“Ed!” Nami screeches.

I just keep booking it into town. I slow down pretty soon, taking a second to assess my location.

“Where can I find a bank in a place like this..?” I mutter to myself, looking around the colourful town.

“Bank’s over there,” a bored voice says behind me. I jump a little and turn around to see a tall man in a Marine hat and pink polo shirt.

“Oh, thank you,” I reply, smiling gratefully at him.

He dismissively waves a hand as he scratches at his stubble with a tattooed arm. “Don’t worry about it. Enjoy Loguetown.” Wow, he sounds like he hates being awake.

I spin on my heel and start trotting toward the bank he pointed out. It’s pretty much empty when I roll in, so I step right up to the teller and smack my stack of foreign bills onto the counter. “Hey there, do you do currency conversions here?”

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After ten minutes of explaining that *yes* Canada is a real place and *yes* this is legal tender and *yes* $10 is equal to 1,000 berri, I walk out of the bank 70,000 berri richer. With a grand total of 82,000 berri to my name I set my sights on the next item on my list.

Finding a shop for Transponder Snails proves to be relatively uncomplicated, in fact after asking a local, I get there in no time at all. A bell rings above the doorway as I step into the

shop. The walls are lined with terrariums of all shapes and sizes, radio equipment I couldn't describe if you paid me to, and some interesting looking briefcases.

"Hello and welcome to the Shell Phone Shack, can I help you find anything?" a chipper voice calls from the front desk. Sat at the register, in a uniform I'm inclined to call a crime against humanity, is a teenage girl with bright neon pink hair and the closest goth makeup can look to clown paint.

"Absolutely you can, you eye burning menace," I gape as I stroll up to her table.

She gives me a wide smile that showcases her multicoloured braces. "Why thank you!"

I shake my head in disbelief and reach my hand across the counter to shake hers. "Your vibes are so fucking amazing. I'm E. D. Domino, you can call me Ed."

"Juniper!" she chirps, vigorously shaking my hand back. "So you looking for a Transponder Snail?"

I give her an easy grin. "Yes I am. This perchance something you can help me with?"

She nods her head so fast the neon pink goes flying everywhere. "Yup! What kind of rig are you looking for? Just a standard Transponder?"

I nod. "First time owner. So what would you recommend?"

Juniper spends a solid and beautiful twenty minutes explaining snail care, habitat cleaning and maintenance, and exactly how to use the Transponder. She sets me up with the whole kit and caboodle; a snail already outfitted with a Transponder and a carrying case/habitat that looks like a fancy briefcase.

All in all, the endeavour costs me 22,000 berri that I gladly hand over to the chipper girl.

“Also, while I’m here, You know where I can pick up a Log Pose around here?”

Her facebrightens. “Totally! You can find pretty basic ones at most general stores, but if you're looking for something more complicated or well calibrated I’d recommend finding a specialist.”

I shake my head. “General store sounds perfect, thank you very much.”

“No problem at all! Enjoy your stay in Loguetown, have a nice day!”

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I walk into the first general store I see. I throw open the door and announce, “how much bug spray do you carry?” I’m met with bewildered looks from the few people milling about the aisles, and a tired sigh from the man behind the counter.

He points down an aisle and I happily trot along. After gathering five cans of that shit (you can never be too careful) and a Log Pose conveniently nearby on a shelf, I saunter up to the cashier who gives me the most dead expression I’ve ever seen on a man.

I’m looking over the display of sweets as he rings me up. “Do you guys carry dark chocolate?” I ask. He shakes his head, expression not budging an inch. I make a face, then toss a milk chocolate bar onto my pile anyways.

“Your total today will be 5,200 berri.”

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With all my shit stashed in my pockets and maybe an hour until I’ve got to find my idiots, I take to wandering the streets like a seventh grader cutting class.

This place is confusing as hell and almost all the buildings look the same, so I get lost pretty damn quick. “Where the hell am I?” I mutter under my breath, swinging a left into an alley.

“Look, you just do what I say and we won’t have a problem, aight?” a voice with a thick brooklyn accent demands. I look down another alley and spot a familiar guy in a Marine hat and pink polo shirt.

He’s staring at someone hidden in the shadows with an entirely bored look on his face. “Look man, I don’t want any trouble.”

The other voice laughs. “And neither do I! Like I said—”

“Duck,” I announce.

The Marine guy I met earlier spins to me wide eyed, squatting into a crouch as I swing my newly acquired snail case at the fucker threatening him. The other guy makes a “dooughf!” as the case connects solidly with his head.

“Wow,” I marvel, “this shit really is battle grade! Not a single scratch on it!” Then I look down at the guy I just clobbered. I’m met with a tall head of green hair and a face full of fangs staring at me bewildered.

Wait a fucking minute—

“Bartolomeo?!” I gape. Oh my god, did I just accidentally derail Dressrosa LITERAL YEARS IN ADVANCE?! OH GOD OH GOD OH GOD—

“Who the hell are you?” he grumbles, rubbing the goose egg on his forehead.

“Uuuuuh…” How the fuck do I handle this? “E. D. Domino. Ed. Uh — I’m a detective.”

His eyes narrow. “A detective, eh? You investigate’n me? Hah, you hack?!” Great, and now he’s getting mean. Fuck this.

“Alright, nope. I can’t do this. Go to the plaza and do some soul searching, dude. And stop attacking people who ain’t done shit to you! Weirdo,” I huff, turning around and stalking out of the alley, grabbing the Marine guy on my way out.

“Oh! And don’t… uh — eat people!” I throw over my shoulder. From the glimpse I catch he looks very confused. Good.

I walk a whole two streets down before I realize I'm still dragging this rando with me. He honestly looks pretty content to just be pulled along.

“Hey, you good?” I ask.

He just kinda shrugs. “Eh. I’ve had worse, I’ll have worse.”

I squint at him. “...Right. Anyways, thanks for the directions earlier.”

He nods. “Yeah. Thanks for… whatever that was.”

I give him a wry smile. “Anywho, you a Marine then?”

He tugs at his collar. “Yeah. Intel and Bounty division.”

Bounty division..? Oh that gives me a wonderful idea.

“Say, seeing as I just totally saved your life, would you be willing to do me a solid?” I ask with an innocent smile.

He gives me a long stare, then shrugs. “Fuck it. My life has been super boring recently, sure. What do you need?”

I let out a low chuckle. “Nothing too bad, but how would you feel about periodically sending me bounty posters, when I ask for them?” This is a great idea. I’m so fucking smart. Having a Marine buddy who can get me visuals for my crew is going to be super handy.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “I mean, sure? Did you want my Snail number or..?”

My eyes widen. “Oh! That reminds me!” I hastily walk up to the nearest wall and take out my letter, flipping it open and scribbling out my new Transponder number on the back.

There, now that is complete and all I have to worry about is handing it off to Dragon. No problem. Probably.

“Yeah, I’ll take your number!” I say, turning with a grin.

The guy, who I just realize I still don't know the name of, is just staring at me with a puzzled expression. “...Ok,” he hands me a creased blank business card with a number scrawled on the back. “I’m Jonah, by the way,” he says, rubbing a hand down his tattooed arm.

And they’re pretty damn cool tattoos. He has what looks like a squid or something on his left and a bunch of jellyfish on his right, both surrounded by seaweed and creeping out from under his polo and ending around mid forearm.

“E. D. Domino, please call me Ed. I feel like this is the start of a beautiful friendship,” I say pleasantly.

“...Right. I’ve got to get back to the office, so uh — call me if you need a poster?” he says with a raised eyebrow.

I flash him a smile and a finger gun, taking off down the street. “Yup! Bye now!”

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With my eyes on the horizon looking for the supposed storm that’s coming and all my shit dealt with, I start to make my way to the plaza. I’m so busy staring at the sky I don’t notice where I’m going until I bump into someone.

“Oh, sorry—”

“My bad—”

I look up at the same time the other person does. We both make matching expressions. “Nevermind.”

“Walk much?” Zoro smirks down at me. I kick him in the ankle.

“Ah,” Nami’s voice says from over Zoro’s shoulder. She’s just come from around the corner with a huge bag of something over her shoulder. Just past her I can see Usopp, carrying a giant fish, with Sanji helping just behind him.

“Hey,” Usopp calls.

“Nami! Ed! I missed you!” Sanji fawns.

“What the hell have you guys been up to?” Nami questions, looking around at each of us and our new loot.

“Doesn’t matter,” Zoro says, looking around like he’s searching for something, “have you guys seen the Captain?” There’s head shaking and disagreement from all of us. “He was going to the execution platform, right? Isn’t that right here in the plaza?”

That’s when I spot the man we’re looking for. High up on the execution platform, surrounded by familiar looking pirates, Luffy sits strapped into the stockade like we’re at fucking Medieval Times.

“Found him,” I sigh.

“Where?” Usopp asks, head on a swivel.

“Where do you think? About to get murdered,” I scoff, pointing up at the platform.

“WHY THE HELL IS HE ON THE EXECUTION STAND?!” they all scream in unison.

“It’s Luffy, why are you surprised? The hell else was he supposed to do here?” I shake my head at them, “it’s the place the Pirate King got executed, what are you gonna do? *Not* get executed too?”

Nami makes a strangled sound and snatches my case out of my hands. “Fine! You three idiots go get him and me and Usopp will get the ship ready. We have to leave *now!”*

Zoro blinks at her, taken aback. “What? Why?”

Nami holds up a barometer that I guess she just carries around. “The barometric pressure is dropping like crazy. There’s a storm coming, and a damn big one,” she snaps it closed and turns on a dime, taking off down the road. “Make it quick!”

“Damnit! Let’s go!” Zoro yells, grabbing me by the wrist and running toward the plaza with Sanji right behind us. We can hear Buggy hollering and hooting from atop the platform, and all the other pirates at the bottom are clamouring and cheering.

“I’M THE MAN WHO’LL BECOME THE KING OF THE PIRATES!” Luffy screams from on high. The crowd explodes into shock, but we keep running further in.

“WAIT!” Zoro yells, people scramble back from the three of us.

“Sanji! Zoro! Ed!” Luffy shouts down at us, “help me out here!”

“You idiot! All that fooling around is catching up with you!” Zoro grouses.

“There’s a limit to how much crap you can get in,” Sanji adds.

I shake my fist up at him. “Dumbass! You can’t get executed *before* you become King! You’re doing it backwards!”

“You’re too late! Just stay back and watch your Captain get executed!” Buggy laughs, raising his sabre over his head.

“Take down the platform!” Zoro orders, the three of us dashing forward.

What the fuck am I doing? Why am I not just staying back and waiting for Dragon?

I pull my pistol out of my holster and fire a couple shots into the pirates blocking our path. “Damnit!” Sanji curses beside me, kicking some guy so hard he goes flying. Zoro jumps ahead of us to cut a swathe through the crowd.

Right. Because I'm a fucking idiot.

"Zoro! Sanji! Nami! Usopp! Ed!" Luffy calls down to us. We pause to look up at him. He smiles a big eye creasing smile. "Sorry, looks like I'm dead."

The boys both make panicked sounds, but I keep my eyes on my Captain.

I... I didn't like that.

Buggy's sword comes down in a neat arc.

I didn't like that at all.

There's a crackle, and the world lights up bright white as the stand is struck by lightning.

I don't want him to die.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter before we're out of the East Blue!

So much important shit in this chapter...

Also dude I forgot how much I love fireworks there was a display in a park for Canada day and one of my friends got hit with a chunk of it. For the second time in their life. I'm starting to think this is a them problem...

Also art of Jonah!

Chapter 20: Chapter Twenty: All For Freedom And For Pleasure

Chapter Summary

> *Everybody Wants to Rule the World - Tears for Fears*
>
> The platform is set alight. It slowly crashes and burns, collapsing into the plaza as it starts pouring. Luffy’s straw hat drifts down right into his outstretched hand.

Chapter Notes

> This song is such a Strawhat theme. It's such a One Piece song in general. You cannot argue with this.
>
> Anyways I burned myself at work again lmao. You can really see where I draw inspiration for Ed's clumsiness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The platform is set alight. It slowly crashes and burns, collapsing into the plaza as it starts pouring. Luffy’s straw hat drifts down right into his outstretched hand.

“Hahaha! I'm still alive!” he laughs, placing the hat back on his slightly charred but otherwise unharmed head.

There’s complete silence from the crowd as he saunters forward.

“Do you believe in god?” Sanji mutters beside me.

“Only the one walking towards us,” I mutter back.

“Stop talking nonsense, we gotta leave this town,” Zoro snaps, sheathing his swords.

I smack Luffy on the head when he makes his way up to us. “Hey! What was that for?” he grumbles.

I glare at him. “Luf, Luffy, loofa, love of my life, what in the *nine hells* made you think *that* was a good idea?!” I yell.

He shrugs. I glare harder. Zoro smacks both of us on the head. “Save it for later! There’s still trouble!” he barks.

Trouble appears with a roar as a literal horde of Marines swarms the plaza like termites.

“They’re here!” Sanji huffs as we all turn and start booking it towards an exit.

“Time to go!” Zoro shouts, grabbing Luffy by the collar when he turns to awe at the fighting.

The streets are slick with rain, and even the rhythmic slapping of Luffy’s sandals and our heaving breath don’t cover the sound of our pursuers.

I hate to say it, but I’m falling a little behind. I’m just not a fucking runner, alright?

A hand grabs my shoulder and I turn, smacking my arm out to pistol whip the fucker. “Hands off!” I yell, minutely picking up my pace to rejoin the boys. “Fucking shit! I was not made for this crap!”

“I’ll carry you, Ed!” Sanji cries, arms outstretched.

Zoro just glares over his shoulder at me. “Hurry the fuck up!” he barks. I wordlessly yell at the both of them, pumping my legs as hard as I can.

An obstacle appears in the middle of our path. “Roronoa Zoro!” shouts Sergeant Major Tashigi, rain soaked and pissed, “you were a pirate the whole time! You lied to me!”

Sanji turns to him with a glare, “what did you do to that lady?!” He’s ignored.

“You never asked me my name or profession!” Zoro shouts back, looking very put off, but drawing his sword regardless.

“I’ll collect that sword, the Wado Ichimonji!” Tagishi proclaims, taking a swing with her Shigure.

Zoro meets the strike head on with a smirk. “Just try it.” He doesn't even bother looking at us as we race past. “Go on ahead.”

“Ok,” Luffy says.

“Make it quick!” I call back.

“That brute dares to harm a lady?!” Sanji grumbles, Luffy and I have to drag him by the collar to keep him on track.

We continue slightly less impeded, a good portion of our perusers getting bottlenecked by the fight behind us. I slip a little, but am quickly caught by Sanji who looks back at me with concern. “I seriously will carry you!”

I shake my head. “My legs might be shit, but I’m gonna use ‘em!”

The three of us have almost made it to the end of the street when, from the mist and rain, appears a tall man stood in front of some kind of motor bike.

“There’s another one?” Sanji groans.

“But we’re almost at the harbour!” Luffy whines.

I look the man up and down, then very pointedly focus my eyes on his face. Because *goddamn* man, his chest is on full fucking display. Is it some kind of distraction tactic to walk around half naked? Because it’s working.

“So you’ve come, Strawhat Luffy,” he grunts in a voice becoming of a man strapped with as many cigars as he is.

“You?!” Luffy shouts, not slowing for a second.

“The name’s Smoker, Marine Captain. Like I said earlier, you can’t make it to the Grand Line without going through me,” he states.

“I forgot about that! Hey Ed, this is the guy you thought was cool right?” Luffy announces.

I shoot him a glare, slicking my soaked hair back. “Not the fucking time, Luf!”

“This that detective you mentioned then?” Smoker rumbles, shaking an arm out into white clouds.

Luffy laughs, “Yup!” We skid to a stop as he disappears into a huge cloud of smoke.

“Oh, that’s interesting,” Sanji deadpans.

Luffy cracks his knuckles and shakes some of the water off his feet. “Hey, you two go on ahead!”

Sanji doesn't even hesitate, just yells, “you got it!” and sprints right past the rapidly growing cloud of smoke.

I don’t let Luffy stop. I grab him by the arm and keep hauling ass. “He’s a Logia, no the fuck you don’t!” I holler.

“Wha — Ed! Lemme fight him!” Luffy whines.

“No!” I snap.

He gets his fucking wish as big white fist coalesces out of the smoke and smacks the pair of us square in the face. We both go sliding across the wet street.

Luffy catches me by the arm and digs his feet into the stone. He continues stretching past where his feet are planted, then slingshots the both of us back toward Smoker who’s upper body has reformed.

“Get ready Ed!” Luffy yells into my ear.

“What?!” I yell back.

Then I’m swung like a fucking battering ram into Smoker, screaming like a banshee. I go right through him of course, but not without catching a mouthful of smoke that I immediately start coughing up.

I swing a full circle back into Luffy. “What the fuck was that?!” I scream in his face, overcompensating my balance through the dizziness.

Luffy just gives me a helpless shrug. “Combo move? It felt like a good idea!”

“It was not a good idea! We can’t fight this guy!” I screech, hooking an arm around his waist and starting to run in the direction of the docks again.

“You really can’t,” Smokers voice rings from somewhere to my right. My vision is obscured by white and I curse. Thick clouds of smoke surround us and slam us into the stonework. I grunt as it presses its weight into us. “Ah, I see. E. D. Domino, right?” Smoker rasps, solidifying above us.

He reaches a hand out and slams Luffy’s head into the ground, a boot clad foot coming up to press my back down as well. “How’d you know my name—” I mutter into the asphalt.

“Looks like your luck’s come to an end,” he states, free hand going back to grab his jutte.

“Or perhaps not..?” a new voice announces.

Oh thank fuck.

“You’re..!” Smoker blanches, staring at Dragon in vague horror.

“What?! Who’s there?!” Luffy muffles into the ground. I crane my neck back to catch a glimpse of the man, cheek pressed into the grit.

“The entire government wants your head,” Smoker mutters, muscles tensing under his open jacket. I stare back at the leader of the Revolutionary army, face half shadowed and green cape billowing around him.

“The world still awaits our answer,” Dragon murmurs, staring down at the pile of us with a smirk.

Then the fucking gust starts.

“WAIT!” I scream, flailing an arm around to reach into my pocket. I yank out the letter and thrust it at him as we’re picked up by the hurricane level winds. His hand reaches out and plucks it from my own.

He gives me a nod, a smirk of what might be amusement, and a small toast with the letter before it’s disappearing into the folds of his cloak.

“LOVE YOUR CAUSE FUCK THE SYSTEM BYE!” I shout over the storm, then we’re hurtling through the air at disorienting speeds. I’m tossed to and fro, completely losing sight of Luffy in the madness.

The maelstrom abruptly cuts out, dropping me in a dizzy heap on the ground, half buried under some random roof shingles. “What just happened?” Luffy groans from my left. I wheeze into the ground.

“What the hell are you guys doing?! Move your asses!” Zoro’s voice demands, then a hand is roughly grabbing onto my collar and hauling me to my feet.

“Do you want to get stuck on this island?!” Sanji yells, coming up beside us. “The ship was already swept out into harbour! We gotta get out there!” he shouts, pointing to the shrinking silhouette of the Going Merry. We all give matching nods of determination, running to find a rowboat or some shit to get us out there.

“Alright!” Luffy yells, running in the opposite direction of us. He latches onto a railing and starts stretching.

“Is he..?” Sanji gapes.

“I’m not gonna like this…” Zoro says with horror.

I start vigorously shaking my head. “Don’t you fuCKING DARE—”

He fucking dares.

He launches himself at us while laughing like a maniac. We go soaring over tumultuous water in a tangled ball, somehow managing to cross the entire distance to the ship. We slam into the sail and slide down into an undignified heap on the ground. We also somehow manage to land directly on top of Usopp, everyone sounding matching groans.

I smack my head into Luffy. “I’m never flying air mail again!”

“You all made it!” Nami cheers, coming over to help us up.

“The ship feels like it’ll flip right over!” Luffy says with a laugh. We can barely see the roiling seas in front of us, the only thing keeping us oriented being the rotating glow of a lighthouse.

“That’s the Light of Guidance, it's a marker for the entrance to the Grand Line!” Nami explains, orange hair plastered to her face from the rain. She turns to look at Luffy with a wide smile. “So what shall we do?”

“Do we have to go there during a fucking hurricane!?” Usopp wails, holding onto the mast for dear life.

I bark out a mirth filled laugh. “Entering on the tailwind of a monsoon, it's fitting for the absolute shitstrom we’ll be bringing with us!”

“Then this calls for a celebration!” Sanji announces, dragging a barrel into the middle of the deck.

I can’t believe it…

Sanji kicks his heel up onto the barrel. “To find the All Blue!”

Luffy follows right after. “To become King of the Pirates!”

Zoro is next. “To be the world's greatest swordsman!”

Then Nami. “To draw a map of the world!”

Usopp puts up his shaking heel as well. “T — To be a Brave Warrior of the Sea!”

I can’t believe I get to be a part of this.

I smack down my foot. “To solve the world's greatest mystery!”

“OFF TO THE GRAND LINE!” Luffy shouts over the thrum of the storm. We lift our heels and crack them down on the barrel, shattering it into pieces.

Off we go indeed.

———

We all retreat into the bowels of the Merry to either towel off or change. Nami had just thrown on a raincoat so she could get back outside and keep track of our course, so it's only me in our shared room.

There's a muffled bang from next door. Then Luffy, in nothing but his shorts with hat in hand, is being tossed through the emergency exit with Zoro's voice following behind him, "go bug Ed then!" then the hatch is slammed again.

I stare down at Luffy while I pull on my shirt, "...do I want to ask?"

He giggles then scampers over and starts shaking his head, his hair spraying water at me. I sputter and shove my towel in his face.

I manage to bully him into a sitting position on the floor and drag the chair over. I start towel drying his hair and frown down at the fluffy thing.

"...Luffy," I call. He hums, leaning his head further into my hands. "Up on the execution platform. Were you — that is…" I trail off, hands slowing. He tilts his head back further, towel slipping into my lap and his head following. He stares up at me with dark eyes. I struggle not to crack under the pressure of meeting them. "If the lightning hadn't… or — or it had been a second later — would you have just…" His eyes widen while I stutter on.

'Left me' is left unsaid.

I bite my lip hard enough I taste blood.

Goddamnit. Goddamnit goddamnit — I knew he was going to be fine! He was going to be fine, he is fine and he will continue to be ***fine—***

But…

I hunch down and press my forehead to his. “Don’t… don’t ever say something that fucking stupid again. Don’t you ever *dare* just accept you’re going to—” I cut myself off before I can start crying, eyelids crushed together to the point I see stars. “You’re not allowed to die without putting up a fight,” I whisper.

Thin fingers thread through my hair. “I’m sorry I made you worry,” he says softly. Not a whisper, never my Captain, but quiet enough it’s almost the same.

“You better be,” I murmur back.

There’s a soft click that has me looking up. Luffy’s shirt and flip flops are sitting on the floor at the base of the emergency exit and I have to push down the embarrassment of someone else seeing me vulnerable like this.

Luffy’s hand on my face pulls me back into focus. “I’m going to be King of the Pirates,” he states.

I huff a weak laugh. “I know—”

He cuts me off. “I’m going to be King of the Pirates, which means I’m not going to die before that happens. You don’t have to worry about that.”

I press his hand further into my face with my own, a sigh ghosting out my lips and over his face. “I know. That doesn’t make it less scary. You make it very hard not to worry, Monkey D. Luffy.”

He beams up at me. “That means you care!” he sings.

I laugh, pulling the towel over his face. “Whatever you say, Captain. Now get dressed, we gotta join the others in the galley.”

He jumps out of my lap with a whoop.

_____

After finishing getting ready, me and Luffy head out. I'm finally getting an opportunity to use the jacket Kaya gave me, and I note with great pride it's absolutely covered in pockets.

We're sat in the kitchen when Nami slams down a map in front of us. "The entrance to the grandline is a mountain," she declares.

The boys give her various looks of disbelief and confusion. " *Mountain?"*

"My first thought exactly. But look! The light of guidance was pointing right at Reverse Mountain, here on the Red Line," she points out on her map.

"Does that mean we have to crash through the mountain?" asks Zoro.

She shakes her head and points to a line on the map. "No, there's a waterway right here."

Usopp makes a noise. "How the hell does that work? A tunnel? Or are we actually going to sail up a mountain?!"

"Any input, First Mate?" Zoro speaks up, shooting me a raised eyebrow. "You're supposed to be some kind of expert on the Grand Line, right?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm not an expert, I just know a lot."

He raises his eyebrow further, "So do you know or not?"

I cross my arms. “Yup. We’re going up the mountain.”

Usopp’s jaw drops. “How?!”

I shrug. “Physics? Converging polarities? *Magnetism?* I don’t know. But that waterway goes up, and we’re going with it.”

Zoro curses. “Why can’t we just go directly south? Avoid that whole mess?”

Luffy stands up, indignant. “No we can’t!”

Nami and I nod along. “Yeah, and there’s a reason for that,” she says.

“It’s much cooler to go in using the real entrance!” Luffy declares.

Nami bonks him on the head. “That’s not why!”

I glance out the window and do a double take. It's completely clear out there, all evidence of the storm gone. “Not to alarm anyone,” I start, standing up slowly, “but I think we just entered the Calm Belt.”

Nami’s head shoots up. She takes a single look out the window and curses, “oh shit!” then she’s running past me out the door, looking around frantically.

“Clam belt?” Usopp questions.

“Whassat?” Luffy asks, following Nami out onto the deck.

“Shut up and grab the oars! We’ve gotta get the hell out of here!” she screeches. I scramble out the door after her, scanning the water’s surface for any hint of a ripple. It’s disturbingly still.

“Chill out, what do you have against clams?” Luffy complains.

“Calm, not clam! The Grand Line is sandwiched by two ocean belts. The Calm Belt is a strip of the ocean where nothing moves, like no wind or currents! It’s a total dead zone!” Nami explains.

Then the ship starts quaking.

“More than that,” I whisper, shifting to compensate for the shaking, “it’s also a nest of Sea Kings.”

Then the horrors start to arrive.

One after the other the titanic creatures rise from the depths of the water to tower above us. Then one unlucky bastard rises up right under our boat, the sheer size of it dwarfing our ship as we balance on its snout.

Nami slides to her knees where she’s hugging the mast. “We’re dead…”

Choked noises escape all the boys as their jaws drop, Usopp literally starts foaming at the mouth. “Nobody fucking move,” I whisper under my breath.

The creature we’re sitting on top of suddenly sniffles, then lets out a fucking earthshattering sneeze that blows us directly into the air. We all start screaming bloody murder, grabbing onto anything we can.

“A GIANT FROG IS JUMPING THIS WAY!” Zoro squawks.

I’m semi tangled in the rigging when Usopp flies past me, my hand reaches out to snag his overalls but I’m just an inch too short. “USOPP FUCKING FELL!” I shriek.

Luffy’s hand shoots out to snatch him right from the mouth of the frog. The ship goes sailing through the air, the rain suddenly reappearing halfway through our descent, and then we’re splashing back down into swirling seas.

“Oh yay… We’re back in the storm now…” Luffy says breathlessly.

“See why we have to use the entrance?” Nami mumbles into the deck.

“Yeah. I get it,” Zoro mutters through his arms.

“Hey guys?” I groan, receiving groans of question in response, “can someone please get me down from here?” Because I am very much still tied up in the rigging, and I’m slowly losing feeling in my feet.

Nami starts explaining how she thinks Reverse Mountain works in the background while Zoro comes over to help me. “How did you even manage this?” he grunts while trying to untwist the ropes.

“Fuck if I know, I was more focused on not dying,” I respond drily. Something comes loose and I crash down on top of Zoro, taking us both onto the deck with matching “oof!” sounds.

Guess this answers one question I had though.

I’ve been wondering if the version of One Piece I had dropped into was manga or anime adjacent, the fact that we just went through the Calm Belt with no sign of Apis should confirm that this is set in the manga.

Then again, there have been a few instances of anime content so far… maybe it's a mix of both?

Fuck if I know.

"So basically it's a mystery mountain, right?" Luffy declares.

"No…" Nami sighs.

"Call me a skeptic, but ships don't climb up mountains," Zoro states, dusting himself off and wiping water from his face.

I tsk, standing up beside him. "Poor, naive Zoro. You have no idea what ships can or cannot do."

He gives me the stink eye, which I ignore in favour of pulling the hood of my jacket up.

"I've heard a bit about it," Sanji mentions.

"The mountain?"

He shakes his head. "Nope, the Grand Line. Supposedly half of the people die just trying to get in. Entering it won't be easy."

I snort. "Wouldn't be fun if it was easy."

"I can see the mystery mountain!" Luffy suddenly shouts, running up to the railing.

“It’s fucking huge!” Usopp screeches. And indeed, the Red Line rises before us, taller than the clouds and imposing as hell.

“Get a good grip of the rudder so we don’t get dragged down!” Luffy orders. Both Sanji and Usopp run inside to get on that. I run to the stern so I can see where the fuck we’re going.

“There it is! Amazing!” Nami awes, pointing to a spot in the cliff face.

There, like a crack through the gates to hell, is our waterway. Several rows of water gates mark the entrance, and we’re currently extremely off route to clear them. I squint through the water pouring down my face “I can’t see shit!”

A pair of binoculars are thrust at me by Zoro and I take them gladly. “Hard to starboard!” I holler.

“Got it!” the boys call back. There’s an ominous snapping sound behind me but I’m focused on how far we turned. “Too much, turn back to port!”

“Uh, slight problem with that!” Usopp yells.

Zoro makes a squawk beside me. “THEY SNAPPED THE RUDDER!”

“WHAT?!”

“WE’RE GONNA CRASH!”

Luffy throws himself off the boat, hat flying off in the process. Zoro grabs the hat while Luffy blows up like a balloon and interposes himself between the ship and the first gate. We bounce off of him and back on course for the current.

“Luffy you numbskull! Grab the fuck on!” I scream, half throwing myself over the rail. He whips his arm back in my direction and grabs my hand in his, the force of his pull sending me careening over the edge.

Someone anchors their arms around my waist and I haul our Captain in. We land in a heap on the ground laughing our asses off.

“We made it!” Sanji and Usopp cheer.

“Goddamn…” Zoro chuckles, getting to his feet and pulling me and Luffy up.

The rain clears as we all make our way to the front of the ship. Nami rips off her raincoat with a laugh. “Now it’s just a straight shot to the summit!”

We rocket up the current, through a layer of clouds and up over the top of the mountain.

My hood flies back. The water on my eyelashes freezes into frost because of our high altitude, and I blink it off to stare at the world from above. Though most of it is obscured by the clouds, it’s still fucking incredible.

The whole universe pauses. My breath catches in my throat.

We made it.

The water spray crystallizes as it hits the air, and then we’re racing down the decline of the mountain. The high speed air whistles through my ears and we dash through the cloud cover. A low sound, almost like a foghorn, bellows around us.

“Hey guys, prepare for an abrupt stop,” I announce.

“Why?” Usopp turns to ask. We break through the cloud layer and can suddenly see the huge shape blocking our way.

“Because there’s a gigantic fucking whale at the bottom!” I scream.

Chapter End Notes

And we are out of the East Blue! Next up: the Alabasta Saga! Or as I like to call it, the Ed Has Lots of Consecutive Bad Times and Goes on a Journey of Self Discovery Saga.

Chapter 21: Chapter Twenty One: A Testament To My Unshaken Faith

Chapter Summary

Windowville - Clem Turner

I stare at Merry's head in horror. "Uh oh."

Chapter Notes

Guess who edited and rearranged the entire goddamn fic in the span of a single day. It was me.

New and improved SSSBMTY this time with more paragraph breaks and split dialogue! All the posted chapters have been updated and edited as well, you don't have to go back and read them I promise all the content is the same just formatted better.

(Can't imagine that happening twice. Future message brought to you from the future, circa the Big Edit™)

This was brought on by a (fair) criticism but just as a PSA, don't give people unsolicited writing advice. It's fucking rude. I took the advice because I can see how the way I formatted my paragraphs was confusing, but if someone has clearly stated their work is self indulgent and not here for criticism, they do not want criticism.

Anyway Alabasta time babey!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"WHAT THE FUCK?!"

"What do we do?!" Usopp wails.

"Do we fight it?!" Luffy asks, frantically looking around at each of us.

Nami's face is horrified and incredulous. "We can't fight that thing! Are you crazy?!"

"But our path is blocked! What the hell do we do?" Usopp cries.

"It's like a fucking wall this close! Where the hell are its eyes?!" Sanji yells from up in the rigging.

Nami's frantic eyes light up. "That's right! Maybe the whale hasn't noticed us yet!"

Zoro's scabbards smack me in the side as he spins on a dime. "We're gonna crash if we stay on course! Go hard to port, there's an opening!"

"Wonderful idea, except the *fucking rudder is still broken!"* Usopp screeches.

Zoro and Usopp both run into the ship, Sanji following close behind. I can hear them yelling and grunting from the front of the ship with Nami. "I've got an idea!" Luffy shouts, running into the ship as well.

We're closing in closer and closer, I can almost make out the details of Laboon's hide. "Luffy having an idea..?" I mutter. Then my eyes widen. "WAIT LUFFY—"

The cannon fires.

I tackle Nami to the ground as Merry's poor poor figurehead smashes backward and almost kills us both. "I almost died just now…" Nami mutters in terror beside me.

I stare at Merry's head in horror. "Uh oh."

“MY SPECIAL SEAT!” Luffy shrieks from the door. Labbon lets out another low bellow and we all freeze.

“Now’s our chance, lets get the fuck out of here!” Zoro yells, pulling out the oars and throwing one at Usopp and Sanji.

“The cannonball did nothing?!” Usopp yelps.

Laboon continues to make his low sounds, bone rattling and painful. “My ears!” Sanji grits out, still rowing as fast as he can.

“Who cares? Just keep rowing!” Usopp sobs.

I’ve just helped Nami to her feet when Luffy steps up behind us. “How dare… you destroy…”

I frantically throw myself at him. ”NO NO NO—”

“MY SPECIAL SEAT!” he hollers, arm sneaking past me and nailing Laboon right in his humongous eye.

“YOU IDIOT!” we all scream at once. Laboons massive fucking pupil darts down to look at our tiny caravel.

“...Fuck,” I whimper.

“COME AT ME, YOU BASTARD!” Luffy yells, shaking his fist up at Laboon.

I grab him by his shirt and start shaking him, tears running down my face. “You fucking moron! You no brain-celled *buffoon!”*

“What they said!” the boys yell from behind us.

Then Laboon opens his gargantuan mouth. Water rushes in through the gaps of his teeth, taking us with it. We all start screaming of course. I lose my grip on Luffy’ shirt and he goes flying off the ship.

“FUCK!”

_____

I’ll leave what a trip through a whale's mouth into his engineered stomach is like up to your imagination. Know only that it is… disturbing.

We find ourselves outside. Or at least, it looks like outside. “So… what do you think?” Nami asks.

“I don’t know what to think of *this,”* Zoro retorts.

“Uh, is this real?” Sanji questions.

Usopp just makes weird noises. “Is this a dream?” he chokes out.

“Yeah. It’s probably a dream,” Zoro responds.

“Then what’s with the house?” Nami asks.

“Illusions,” Zoro says, a bead of sweat rolling down his temple.

“I have several questions,” I state.

And I do. We are in a small sea of stomach fluid, the whales stomach walls are painted to look like a sky, and there's a tiny island with a house on it infront of us. Like I said, several questions.

Even more questions when a giant fuck off squid bursts out of the sea of fluid and immediately gets speared through by multiple harpoons. As it collapses into the water it reveals an open door and three ropes connected to the harpoons embedded in the squid.

“Guess someone's home,” Zoro muses, crouched with his hands on the hilts of his swords.

“Let’s just hope it's a person,” Sanji replies, one leg already raised.

“I’m sure it's fine and it’ll be a totally reasonable and nice guy,” I state.

They both give me doubtful looks. “4,000 berri.” I announce, staring right at Zoro. He squints at me. “And I bet he looks like something stupid. Like a plant,” I add.

He grabs my hand and shakes it so fast it almost strains my wrist. “Your timing couldn't be better. I owe Nami a huge debt, and you’re gonna be helping repay it for me,” he smirks.

Poor dumb Zoro.

“I wanna go home…” Nami cries from the ground.

“Where the hell is Luffy..?” Usopp whimpers. I can’t help but agree. Being separated from him, even if it *is* my own fault for losing my grip, so soon after the execution fiasco feels… bad.

When the hell did I get so damn codependent?

Then the harpoons start to drag the big squid in, and a figure appears in the doorway.

“Open fire! We should just open fire!” Usopp wails.

“Wait, someone’s coming out…” Sanji starts. Then Crocus steps out.

Look, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, the character design in this place is A) hilarious, and B) horrifying to behold in person.

“It’s a flower!” Sanji gapes. Then he squints. “Wait. No, that's a person.”

“No,” Zoro says in a horror filled tone.

“Yes,” I hiss, a smile stretched over my teeth.

“How did you do that?” he demands in a whisper.

“You’ll never know,” I whisper back, still grinning like the devil.

“He killed that thing in one blow…” Nami wheezes.

“Was he trying to save us, or just fishing?” Sanji mumbles. Him and Crocus make some very intense eye contact as he strolls over to his lawn chair. Then he sits his ass down and opens the newspaper. “Say something!” Sanji shouts. Crocus does not.

“I — If you wanna fight, we’ll fight, you bastard!” Usopp sputters out, pointing a dramatic finger at him.

Crocus’s stare intensifies. “Better not, or someone will die…” he states.

Both Nami and Usopp throw themselves at each other, sweat pouring off their bodies.

“Oh? And who would that be?” Sanji asks, pale and voice shaking.

“Me,” Crocus deadpans.

I can’t help it. I burst out laughing. Nami and Usopp shoot me harsh death glares, but it only makes me laugh harder.

Zoro puts a hand on Sanji’s shoulder. “Chill out. There’s a couple things we need to know, where are we, and who are you?”

Crocus continues to stare them down. “It’s common courtesy to introduce yourself to others before asking questions, you know?”

Zoro blinks. “Right. Sorry. I’m—”

“My name is Crocus, the lightkeeper of the Twin Capes. I’m 71 years old, a gemini and blood type AB.” I literally collapse to my knees with how much I’m wheezing.

“NOBODY MINDS IF I KILL HIM, RIGHT?” Zoro squawks.

Sanji pats his shoulder. “Calm down.”

“NO!” I gasp into the floor through the laughter. “Don’t kill him! Please! He’s too funny to die!”

“You wanna know where we are? First you trespass in my private resort, then you start mouthing off and laughing at me? Besides, I think it’s pretty obvious seeing as you were *eaten!”* Crocus huffs, flipping the page of his newspaper.

He glances at the paper then back at us, then back at the paper and back again.

“So we actually got swallowed by a whale…” Usopp says, disgruntled.

Nami clutches at her hair. “What do we do?! I don’t wanna be digested!”

Crocus once again focuses his intense stare at us. “Would you cut that out?!” everyone around me shouts as I double over further, almost hacking up my lungs with how little breath I have to laugh.

“Haven’t you guys heard of a repeating gag?” Crocus grumbles.

“THAT WAS A GAG?!” everyone screams. Tears are falling down my face and I cannot breathe. I love this guy.

“If you’re looking for an exit, it’s right over there,” he says, pointing to the very large and obvious gate we somehow managed to miss.

“We can get out?! Why is there an exit in a whale's stomach?” Nami groans, then raises an eyebrow. “And how is it floating in the sky?”

“It’s painted! A mural on the whale’s stomach!” Usopp exclaims.

“That’s just my way of having a good time,” Crocus intones. Usopp almost lunges off the ship, if not for Zoro grabbing him.

Then everything starts shaking. The stomach acid starts roiling and sends our ship, and the house-boat Crocus is on, rocking. “What the hell?!” Sanji yelps.

“So he’s started again…” Crocus sighs.

Nami points at the house-boat. “That thing’s made of iron!”

Usopp’s eyes light up. “Of course! We’re on a sea of gastric acid! If we stay any longer, our ship will be dissolved!” He turns to the old man with a glare, “just what the hell is going on?!”

“This whale is banging his head on the Red Line again,” Crocus responds.

I pick myself off the floor. “Because he wants to cross, or because he wants to hurt himself?” He gives me a keen look.

“Now that he mentions it, the whale was covered in scars, and was screaming at the sky!” Nami says.

“What does it mean?” Usopp asks.

“It means he’s suffering!” Nami cries. There’s more harsh rocking. “I get it, he must be trying to kill the whale from the inside out!” she grits.

“What a nasty way to kill something…” Usopp frowns.

I bonk them both on the head. “He isn’t trying to kill him.” They both shoot me glares.

“Who cares, we still have to get out of here. We’ll be dissolved if we stick around,” Zoro interrupts.

“We don’t have any right to judge the old man, and no reason to save the whale. Let's just get out of here,” Sanji states. I roll my eyes but say nothing.

“We’re not gonna get anywhere if the waves keep surging like this!” Usopp yells.

“We still have to hurry, I’m worried about Luffy,” Zoro grunts. “I think I saw him fly out of its mouth, so he’s still out there!”

I stroke my chin in false thought. “4,000 more berri says he’s already inside and about to make a dramatic entrance!” I declare.

Zoro rolls his eyes at me. “Deal! Just help me fucking row!”

I roll my eyes back two times as hard. “Cause that went *soooo* well last time!”

Out of the corner of my eye I see Crocus dive from his house-boat into the gastric sea. “He jumped in! That crazy old man is gonna get himself dissolved!” Usopp shouts.

“Don’t worry about him, just get closer to the door,” I grunt, trying to help Zoro with the oar.

Then there's a loud bang and an influx of screaming from high above us. Three figures come barreling out the smaller door attached to the big door; Luffy, an in disguise Vivi, and Mr… 9? Yeah. 9.

"Guys! You're alright!" Luffy laughs from the air. "So uh, I could use a hand!" Then the three of them plummet into the sea of acid.

"Dumbass…" I sigh.

"How the fuck — C'mon, we gotta save Luffy," Zoro groans.

Fishing the three of them out isn't all that hard, and in no time we have them soaking gastric acid into our deck. By that point Laboon has stopped his violent rocking, and the surges have calmed down.

"Who the hell are you two?" Zoro demands. Vivi leans away from Sanji, who's just kinda crouching beside her creepily, to start whispering with the 9 guy. I pull Sanji back by his shirt collar and give Vivi a semi-apologetic look.

"You thugs are still here?! For the last time! I won't let you lay a finger on Laboon as long as I live!" Crocus holler from the door.

"Oh, he's back," Usopp mutters.

"Who's the old guy?" Luffy questions.

I see both Vivi and the 9 guy opening their cases and pulling out their cannons.

Vivi lets out this terribly false sounding laugh. "You can't bully us into leaving."

“We won’t let you interfere with our whale hunting business any longer!” Mr. 9 proclaims.

Uh, I think the fuck not.

“WHALE POACHER!” I holler, then Sparta kick 9 guy right back into the acid.

“HuuAH?!” he cries as he splashes into the fluid, cannon following him down. Vivi drops her cannon and turns to me with a bewildered and incredulous look.

My crewmates are much the same.

“Ed?!”

“What the hell?”

I throw my hands up in surrender, put them down to kick Vivi’s gun away from her, then put them back up. “What?! They were gonna shoot the whale! They have giant *guns!”*

“So you’re a whale rights activist now?!” Zoro grits out.

I glare at him. “Dude, I have a *conscience.* And whales are cool! I mean, whale *sharks* are my favourite animal ever but—”

He cuts me off with a loud groan. Usopp smears his hands down his face. “Why are you like this?”

I shrug. “Mental illness?”

Usopp grumbles and Zoro shakes his fist at me.

“Wait… so is the old man protecting the whale..?” Nami murmurs, giving Vivi this weird look.

“You won’t stop us! One minor setback isn’t going to keep up from completing our mission and taking this whale as food for our town—” Vivi’s fake snooty voice is cut off by Luffy punching her upside the head and knocking her out.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I wanted to hit her!” he announces. We stare at him in silence for a second.

“Can someone please save me?!” Mr. 9 gurgles from the stomach acid.

I have a heavy sigh. “Fish him up.”

_____

“This is an island whale, native to the West Blue. It’s the largest species of whale in the world, and this one's name is Laboon,” Crocus tells us after we move to his house-boat. We have the two bounty hunters tied together, and are sat around Crocus in his lawn chair. Besides Luffy, that is, he’s trying to climb the palm tree.

“These two are thugs from a nearby town. Their goal is to hunt Laboon because he could feed their town for two to three years. Not that I'd let them!” Crocus snaps before going to a rant about how he met Laboon. I’m more focused on checking out the cannon I stole from Vivi.

I don’t understand this thing in the slightest, but still…

*Cannon cool. Cannon **very** cool.*

“Hello? Ed are you listening? Stop drooling!” Nami's voice snaps me out of my revelry.

“Huh? What was the question?” I ask, wiping my chin.

She rolls her eyes so hard I worry she’ll strain them. “I *said* we’re leaving! Get on the Merry!”

“Geez, fine! You don’t have to yell,” I grumble, shoving the cannon back in its case and taking it onto the ship.

“Please don’t tell me you plan on taking that big thing with you,” Zoro asks disapprovingly.

I shoot him a glare. “Cram it, green boy. If you can have three fucking katanas I can have a cannon!” Then I mumble under my breath, “besides, if Wolfwood can carry around a giant fucking cross-gun I can carry a comparably much smaller cannon…”

“What was that?” Zoro questions, leaning in closer.

“I said you still owe me 8,000 berri,” I reply smugly. His face drops as we start to move through the giant door and through the constructed tunnels inside Laboon.

“This is some waterway. It’s amazing that this whale is still alive with a hole this big inside his body,” Zoro changes the subject.

“Just a doctor’s playful mind,” Crocus grunts from his lawn chair, still flipping through his newspaper.

“Doctor?” Usopp repeats incredulously.

“I may not look it, but I’m legally certified. I even ran a clinic on the cape a long time ago. Before that I was a ship's doctor for a few years.”

Luffy’s eyes light up from where he’s sat on our snapped figurehead. “Really?! You should join my crew as a doctor!” he laughs as we come to a stop at another large door.

Crocus gets out of his seat to start climbing a ladder up the side of the tunnel. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m too old to be doing reckless things like you youths,” he grumbles back.

“So you’re a doctor living inside a whale… That have any correlation?” Nami asks, leaning forward on crossed arms.

“That’s right,” Crocus grunts, turning a big wheel attached to the door. “With a whale this big, it’s impossible to treat from the outside.”

As the door cracks open, we go spilling out back into the sea. “Alright! They sky!” Luffy cheers, jumping to his feet and spreading his arms.

I just well and truly had a Book of Jonah moment… Do I count as an actual prophet now?

“What should we do with these two?” Usopp asks, nudging Mr. 9 with his boot.

“Just toss them somewhere around here,” is Zoro’s answer, grabbing the two of them by the backs of their clothes and fully throwing them overboard.

“Heh. Deserved,” I snicker.

Luffy leans over the side of the ship. “So… Who were you guys again?”

“Shut up! It’s none of your business!” Vivi snaps back.

“Wait, Miss Wednesday. Maybe it *is* their business, seeing as they’re pirates,” Mr. 9 retorts.

The both of them strike as dramatic poses as they can while still treading water. “True indeed, Mr. 9. Our organization may have some use for you. Prepare yourselves!” Then they both turn and start sprint swimming away from us.

“Until next time, you hillbilly pirates!” 9 screams.

“Heed this, Crocus! We will be back!” Vivi hollers.

“What a couple of weirdos,” I snort, then I pat the cannon case at my side. “Whoops! Seems like they left this behind! Guess it's mine now.”

“You’re despicable,” Zoro mutters.

“You’re 8,000 berri indebted to me,” I respond without missing a beat.

“What’s this?” I hear Luffy mumble off to the side.

“Are you sure about just letting them go? They’ll probably be back, you know,” Nami says to Crocus.

“Even if I didn’t, there’ll be more who’ll take their places,” he responds, steering his island-boat towards the cape.

We all get settled down at a table he has outside. “Those pirates sure are taking their time…” Luffy muses, lying cross legged on the ground.

“Idiot, this is the Grand Line,” Sanji scoffs from where he’s sat on top of the table, “they promised to be back in 2-3 years. It’s been 50. They’re obviously long dead. No matter how long that whale waits—”

He’s cut off by Usopp smacking his face into the table and shaking his fist. “You don’t know that for sure!” He raises his head, a bright red spot on his forehead. “They might still come back! I thought it was very touching. A whale who still believes in his friend's promise…”

“The truth is far more cruel, however,” Crous pipes up, his back turned to us. “Those fellows left already. From the Grand Line, that is. I heard from a reliable source.”

Usopp’s face goes pale. “What?! I don’t get it, why would they leave him like this?!” I mean this is the nicest way possible, but does Usopp have… abandonment issues? Fucking *Yasopp* .

“Hey, are we by chance talking about the Rumbar Pirates?” I butt in from beside Sanji on the table.

Crocus looks over his shoulder at me, a gimmer in his eye I don’t really know what to make of. “Indeed. You heard of them, youngster?”

I grimace. “Yeah. Heard half the crew got hit by an incurable disease and tried to escape the Grand Line to find a doctor. I don’t know what happened to them, besides that they tried their luck with the Calm Belt route…”

Nami makes an unhappy noise. “But the Calm Belt…”

I nod. “The other half got swallowed by the Florian Triangle. Only god knows what happened to that lot.” Well, god and myself. But they don’t really need to know that.

“That’s terrible. What horrible luck…” Usopp mutters.

“How the hell did you hear that?” Zoro grouches.

I smirk, tap my temple, and in a sing-song voice croon, “Detective!” He shoots me a stink eye. I make a cash motion with my hand. He looks away.

Who knew all it took to shut him up was leverage? Nami really knew what she was doing.

“Even if what that youngster says is true, it remains that Laboon's friends will not be coming back,” Crocus intones.

“Who knows, maybe they left something behind for him,” I muse, resting my chin on folded hands. He shoots me another weird look. What is with this guy?

Nami makes more unhappy sounds. “So have you tried to explain this to Laboon? He seems to understand human language, right?”

Crocus heaves a sigh. “I have. I explained the whole thing to him. He just won’t listen. He’s been howling at Reverse Mountain and bashing his head against the Red Line ever since.” My crew mates make commiserating comments around me. “He refuses to believe that they’ll never come back. It’s too late for him to go back to the West Blue, so his friends are his only hope.”

Sanji blows a cloud of smoke. “Tragic, really. But in a way you were also betrayed, right? Why don’t you just leave the whale?”

Crocus stares up at Laboon, a furrow in his brow. “Look at those scars on his head. If he continues as he is, he’ll die. I’m not gonna let him, he’s been my companion for fifty years after all.”

I notice Luffy start to wander towards the ship.

Oh no the fuck he doesn’t.

I slide off the table to run after him. I swing an arm over his shoulder with a tight insincere smile. “Heeey Captain! You weren’t about to rip the main mast off our ship to stab a whale, were you? Because if you were about to do that I would be very upset!”

His shoulders hunch under my arm and he gives me a big slightly nervous smile. “Um. If I was about to do that I definitely wouldn't be doing it now?”

I push my face closer to his. “Wonderful! So how about we try something else, hm?”

He frowns. “Like what? Fighting people always seems to get them to listen to me.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s weird that that works for you. But I’m not saying you don’t have to fight him. Just don’t break the ship to do it, we kind of need it to sail the Grand Line.”

Luffy gives me a huge toothy grin. “Ok!” he chirps. Then he takes off sprinting up Laboon’s head. I shake my head with a smile, then start my way back to the group.

“What the hell is he doing?” Sanji mutters.

Zoro groans. “Take your eyes off him for one second and…”

There's a loud yell from atop Laboon's massive head. “Uh, what did he just do?” Nami asks, her voice oozing apprehension.

Usopp stares with a bead of sweat dripping down his face. “Did he just punch the—”

“Yeah he just punched the whale,” I finish for him.

Then Laboon starts screaming and flailing. “YOU ASS! LUFFY STOP!” Sanji, Zoro and Nami all scream in unison.

Usopp grabs me by the front of my shirt and starts shaking me, tears running from his eyes. “WHY DID YOU LET HIM DO THAT?!”

I throw my hands up. “You think I could stop Luffy from fighting *anything?* Just be glad he didn't rip off our main mast to do it!”

Then Laboon smashes his face into the cape way too close to us for comfort.

I don’t think I have enough words to describe what seeing a mountain sized whale fighting a human sized dude is like, which is saying a lot because I read too much as a child and now have the vocabulary of an eighty year old man.

Luffy is slammed into the lighthouse.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Zoro screams, hands gripping at his short hair. Crocus is starring in shock. Laboon is still howling in rage and gearing up for a further fight.

“IT’S A TIE!” Luffy hollers. Laboon pauses. Luffy smirks up at him. “I’m pretty tough, eh? Our fight hasn’t been settled, so we have to fight again! Your other friends may be dead, but I’m your new rival! And once my crew sails around the Grand Line,” his face explodes into a bright grin, “when we’re done we’ll duke it out again!”

We all look on with smiles on our faces. Laboon’s massive eye tears up and he starts wailing again, this time out of emotion instead of pain.

Luffy jumps to his feet. “Ed! Come help me with this!”

I can’t keep the beaming smile off my face as I get up and follow him.

Chapter End Notes

Here we go! Why do these random men seem to know things...

Hopefully this is a little easier to read now lmao.

Also as a sidebar, any ships that are tagged in this fic will be mostly background things. You may notice the Nami/Vivi tag is there now, but their relationship isn't going to be something that develops primarily on screen.

Who's ready to watch Ed get absolutely bitchslapped by the plot?

Chapter 22: Chapter Twenty Two: You Look Desperate, You Look Pathetic

Chapter Summary

Sweet Dreams, Sweet Cheeks (Remastered) - Los Campesinos!

I can almost feel the weight of Crocus's stare as we smile up at the happy whale.

Chapter Notes

WE'RE BACK MOTHERFUCKERS WE LIIVEEDDD!!

So many important details in this chapter... Sooo many...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey Laboon," I start. Me and Luffy are both on top of Laboon's head and are smearing paint across his scarred skin in the shape of our Jolly Roger. Laboon makes a low croon. "Making bets is kind of my thing, so I'd like to make one with you."

Laboon makes another sound. "How's this, I bet we're gonna bring you back something real special when we come back around. If we don't, you get to tell everyone I'm a huge liar. But if we do…" I smile down at his hide, "if we do, you have to sing a song for me!" Laboon sings a long happy sound. I laugh. "Ha! Knew that would get you! So you've just gotta wait for us to get back."

Luffy laughs, loud and joyful from just over the curve of Laboons head. "I want a song too!"

I snort. "Ok, two songs, and you can call both of us names if we fail." Laboon makes a vibrating hum like a laugh.

When we finish and make our way down, Luffy yells back up at Laboon, “it’s a rush job, so don’t go bashing your head on the rocks anymore and make it disappear! This is a sign of our promise to fight again!” Laboon makes an agreeing whine. Luffy grins a blinding smile up at him. “Good!”

I wrap a paint cover arm around his shoulder. My poor jacket is definitely looking worse for wear… “And don’t you forget about our bet! If you keep hitting the Red Line it's off!” I shout up at him.

I can almost feel the weight of Crocus’s stare as we smile up at the happy whale.

I should probably figure out what that’s about.

_____

The rest of the crew had spread out while me and Luffy were painting, and I’ve just sat down next to Nami at the table when she starts screaming. I fall backwards off my chair with a squawk.

“What the hell?!” I yell from the ground.

“What? You’re being noisy,” Luffy complains.

“What’s the matter Nami? If it’s about food it’s ready!” Sanji cries, coming back from the ship with huge plates of the Elephant Tuna he got back in Loguetown.

“The compass! It’s broken! It’s just spinning and pointing all over the place!” she wails.

I climb back onto the chair levelling a flat glare at her. “Are you kidding me? You burst my eardrums for *that?!”*

She sends me an incredulous glare back. “The *compass* which we need for *navigation* is *broken!* I’d say that’s worth a little screaming!”

I roll my eyes and groan. “Compasses don’t *work* on the Grand Line. God, we really walked ass backwards out here, didn’t we?”

“What do you mean they don’t *work?!* How the fuck am I supposed to navigate without a damn compass?!” Nami hollers, looking seconds away from strangling me.

I throw my hands up. “Don’t shoot the messenger! I’m actually amazed you’ve never heard of this…”

“It’s sadly apparent only one of you came here with a single clue about anything. For god's sake! Did you all come here just to die?” Crocus lectures us. “Common sense doesn’t apply in this ocean. Like your friend said, compasses don’t work here.”

Nami’s eyes light up and her brow furrows. “Then… is it the magnetic field?”

Crocus nods. “That’s right.” As he gets into explaining things, I notice Luffy starting to chow down on the food Sanji brought.

I snag a plate away from him before he can devour it all. The slabs of meat it’s cut into are bigger than my damn head, and I manage to scarf down two before Usopp starts crying and Nami starts screaming. “Would all of you shut up for five seconds so I can figure this out!”

“To navigate the Grand Line you’ll need a Log Pose,” Crocus announces. The group makes confused noises so he elaborates. “A Log Pose is a special kind of compass that records magnetic fields.”

“Is it weird looking?” Luffy asks through a mouthful of fish.

“I guess it does look rather odd,” Crocus agrees.

Luffy hums, “so something like this?” and holds up a Log Pose I think he stole from Mr. 9.

“Yes, that’s it. Without one it would be impossible to navigate this ocean,” Crocus explains.

Nami nods. “Right, I get it. But hang on…” Then she spins on her heel and sucker punches Luffy square across the jaw. “WHY THE HELL DO YOU HAVE ONE?!”

Luffy rubs his jaw from the ground. “Those two weirdos earlier left it on board.”

Nami raises an eyebrow. “Them?”

Luffy tilts his head. “Why’d you punch me?”

“Just felt I had to.”

“Oh.”

She snatches the Pose from his hands and looks it over. “No dial faces or markings…”

Crocus looks out to the ocean. “Each island on the Grand Line has a unique magnetic field surrounding it. To sum it up, you’ll have to record the magnetic field interaction between any two islands before you can progress to the next. From Reverse Mountain you can choose one of seven magnetic fields to record, which will take you on a different route of islands. But no matter which route you start with, all paths converge into one.” He gives us an intense look. “Laugh Tale. The final stop on the Grand Line. The only people to ever confirm its existence is the King of the Pirates and his crew.”

Usopp's whole face lights up. "Does that mean the One Piece is there?!"

"Who knows? That's the most prominent theory."

Wait—

Oh my god the One Piece isn't on Laugh Tale. The way he said that — What if the One Piece really ***isn't*** *there at all?!*

I snap my dropped jaw shut when Crocus sends me an odd look.

Guess I'll see when we get there.

"Enough thinking. We can see it for ourselves once we're there!" Luffy declares, fishbone stuck between his grinning teeth. Then he sighs and pats his bulging stomach. "Ah! Should we get going then? I finished eating."

Sanji and Usopp start screaming at him while I surreptitiously slide my empty plate away from myself. Sanji takes a violent swing at Luffy with his foot, sending him flying at an unsuspecting Nami who's admiring her new wrist wear.

The force of which he goes crashing past Nami shatters the delicate glass of her Log Pose. She stares at it blankly for a second, then jumps up with a furious howl and hurls both Sanji and Luffy off the cape with her bare hands. "YOU TWO CAN COOL YOUR HEADS IN THE SEA!"

Jesus, Nami's fucking scary when she's mad.

“Ok, so, correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t the Log Pose work better when it’s not *broken?!”* Usopp shrieks.

Nami starts frantically waving her arms around. “What do we do, Crocus?! Our Log Pose—”

“I have one,” I pipe up from my chair.

Nami turns to me with the anger of a hundred men. “You *WHAT?!”*

I shrug. “I have one. I bought one in Loguetown because *I know what I’m doing.”*

Crocus huffs out a laugh. “At least one of you youngsters does then. Why don’t you save that one, I’ll give you mine as a present for helping Laboon. Having an extra never hurts.”

I give him a strange look. “I don’t see why not, if you're ok with giving it up.”

He gives me a sly grin. “I have something else for you as well, youngster.”

Eh?

In the time it takes for Luffy and Sanji, accompanied by Vivi and Mr. 9 for some reason, to crawl out of the water Crocus has already retrieved his items. He hands Nami her new Log Pose, and me a leather tube thing about the length of my hand wrist to fingertip.

“I’ve got a feeling you’re just the person this item was waiting for,” Crocus states, a knowing smile on his face. I furrow my brow at him as I open it. Inside is a golden spyglass. It's polished to perfection and there's what looks like a coin insignia stamped into the barrel.

Crocus huffs out another laugh. “Every good pirate needs a reliable bring ‘em near. An old pal of mine left that with me, I think you’d be a fine next owner.” I look up at him with wide surprised eyes.

An old pal… did this used to belong to a member of the Roger Pirates?

“Can I really—”

I’m cut off by Vivi and Mr. 9 both suddenly screaming behind me.

“WHAT? YOU BROKE IT?! THAT WAS MINE!”

“YOU’RE STUCK HERE TOO?! HOW LONG WERE YOU GOING TO MAKE US BEG?!”

“Did I forget to mention we have an extra?” Nami says snidely. Both of the Baroque Works agents go white in the face and deflate.

“It’s fine. You can ride with us,” Luffy decides. “You said it was called Whiskey Peak? Let’s go there.”

I stalk right up to the pair of them and clamp a hand on each of their shoulders, a plastic smile slapped on my face. “No funny business, right?”

They both give frantic nods as I back off. Nami is grumbling under her breath and Usopp makes an incredulous face. “Why? These two are obviously pretty shady characters!”

“It’s fine. Don’t sweat the small stuff,” is Luffy’s nonchalant reply.

“Choose your route carefully, once you leave the starting point you’ll be committed to your path,” Crocus advises.

Luffy smiles wide. “That’s fine, if we don't like it we can try a different route next time!”

The slow creeping joy on Crocus’s face is plain as day. “I see.”

Luffy laughs, rolling his neck and shoulders. “Ok! It’s time we get going!”

Vivi is giving him an odd look. “Just who are you?”

Luffy finishes stretching his arms to turn to her with a wide gin. “Me? I’m the man who’ll be the King of the Pirates!”

Crocus starts chuckling under his breath and the other two start snickering for completely different reasons.

Poor shits have no idea who they’re dealing with.

———

It’s just hit sunrise when we finally have everything ready to go. “Alright, your Log Pose should be set by now. Make sure it’s pointing to the right place,” Crocus instructs.

“Yup! It’s pointed straight at Whiskey Peak,” Nami confirms.

“Bye then, flower gramps! Thank you for the Log Pose!” Luffy yells from the ship. “We’re leaving now, whale! Bye!”

I rest my crossed arms on the bannister and look up at the monstrosity we painted on his head. “Don’t you forget our bet, Laboon!” I holler up, huge smile on my face.

As our ship starts to pull out I whistle a couple crisp bars of Binks Brew. Laboon sounds a long joyful whine, then hums a couple bars back. I snicker at the bewildered faces of my crew.

_____

The second it starts snowing after we leave Reverse Mountain I put a pitying hand on Nami’s shoulder. “The next few hours are going to be hell. I wish you the best of luck.”

She gives me an odd look. “Why do you say that like you’re leaving?”

“Oh honey. I have a very important call to make downstairs, but I have complete faith in you. Just, ah — don’t take your eyes off the Log Pose, yeah?” Her eyebrows raise in another weird expression and I give her a solemn nod of my head.

I barely make it into the ladies cabin when I’m suddenly and violently tossed on my ass by the ship bucking. “GodDAMNIT—” I flip flop around for a while before the ship finally calms to the point I can get to my feet.

“Good lord, this is gonna be terrible…” I mutter under my breath as I pull out the armoire drawers and retrieve my Transponder case, place it on the desk, and pop it open. Inside sits my lovely little Transponder Snail.

The sweetheart is yellow inside a red shell with pink stripes. “Hi,” I start. The snail just blinks up at me slowly. “I’m gonna give you a name, if you’re ok with that.” He blinks at me again. I blink back. “Right. How’s President, Mr. President?”

I don’t think snails can look smug or sigh but mine somehow manages to do both at once. “I hope this is the start of a long and beautiful friendship. You mind if I make a call?” Mr. President scoots forward an inch or two and turns on his side. “Wonderful.”

I pick my small collection of numbers I had stashed inside the case and pluck out the number Jonah had given me. Thank god I had learned how to properly use rotary phones from my grandma, or this might have been confusing.

The Transponder rings for a beat before it makes a clicking sound and its face slowly morphs to a bored look and grows a goatee. That’s… actually really weird to watch. Huh.

“Hello?” Jonah's voice asks from the President's mouth.

I open my mouth to reply but then a sudden bang on the side of the cabin wall causes a jet of water to start spewing into the room. “OH FUCK! GIMME A SECOND—”

I spit out a string of curses as I smack a plank of wood I brought down here for just such an emergency onto the hole and start hammering nails into it frantically. By some stretch of a miracle, it actually works. “Fucking Christ. I’m good at this!”

Then the ship makes a quick and violent turn that sends me screaming into the other side of the cabin. “ShiT FUCK ASS—” I’m then once again tossed by the ship directly onto my feet. I squat down into a crouch to better keep my balance, swears still spilling from my lips.

After a solid minute of rapid rocking, the room once again evens out and I let out a long drawn out sigh of relief. I trot back over to the desk and pick back up the Transponder with a dazzling smile.

“Heeey Jonah it’s me Ed, just calling to start cashing in on that favour!” I sing into the mic. There's a moment of silence from the other side of the line. My bright smile slowly dims as it goes on.

“Oh, it’s E. D. Domino,” he finally answers, voice as deadpan as I remember it. “You know, I never thought I’d actually have to see your face again, but here it is; on my desk in full colour. I have to ask, what the fuck.”

“What—” I start to ask, but am cut off by Nami suddenly screaming above me, much louder than she had been so far. The screaming is continuous, and slowly grows louder and louder until the hatch above me is thrown open and Nami comes tumbling down.

She keeps screaming as she scrambles across the floor towards me. I notice Luffy and Usopp both poke their heads down through the hatch but my attention is snatched away by the piece of paper that Nami (still screaming) shoves in my face.

“Calm down, what are you—” I freeze as I finally get a clear look at the paper. I slowly reach my hand over to the Transponder. “I’m… gonna have to call you back,” I say into it, not taking my eyes off the paper.

The click of the call ending is secondary to my horror as I take the paper in my hands. Staring back up at me is my own face, eyebrow up and a fucking peace sign raised. The big bold words ‘WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE E. D. DOMINO’ are stark against the paper.

The 10,000,000 berri under that is what's more concerning. “Ah. That’s not good,” I mutter.

Then my eyes roll into the back of my skull and I pass out.

_____

“...een worse, to be fair. Oh, I think they’re coming to!” Usopp’s voice is the first thing I hear when I fight my way into consciousness.

“Wha…” I mumble, squinting open my eyes and trying to look around. I’m laying down on the bed in the ladies room, and when I turn my head I find myself nose to nose with Luffy. I squint at him. “Hi?”

He smiles back. “Hi.”

“What happened?” I ask, groggily rubbing my eyes.

“You saw your new bounty poster and fainted,” Luffy answers, not moving an inch back from my face.

“My what,” I deadpan.

He laughs. “Yup! You’re worth 10,000,000 berri now!”

I nod slowly. “Right. Of course. Excuse me for a moment.”

And I pass right back out.

_____

“...tter wake up soon, we’re almost there.”

I groan and roll over, then immediately jump awake as I bang on the floor. “Ah shit! I’m awake!” I cry, hands frantically searching for my pistol.

“Hey, Ed’s awake!” Luffy laughs.

I’m still in the ladies cabin, and both Usopp and Luffy are sat on the floor playing a card game. “...Whatcha playing?” I ask.

Usopp groans and shoves his cards into his face. “It *was* crazy Eights, but Luffy was convinced we were playing Go Fish and *ate* a card when I told him we weren’t!”

I blink slowly at Luffy's entirely unapologetic face. “...That tracks. Anyway, how long was I out?”

Usopp scratches his head. “Little less than half an hour? I mean, almost an hour if you add the first time you passed out.”

Wow, I didn’t know I was so prone to fainting…

A run a ragged hand through my hair. “Shit, ok. The crazy weather done up there?”

Luffy nods, pulling a card out of his mouth to put it on the pile, much to Usopp’s disgruntlement. “Yeah, it's fine now. Uno!” Usopp lets out a strangled scream and throws his cards down. “You gonna pass out again if we bring up the poster?” Luffy asks.

I bury my head in my hands. “No. Just — what the hell?” I groan, vigorously rubbing my face.

“I mean… you *did* shoot that Marine in the stomach. And kicked him in the balls. And he swore vengeance on you,” Usopp says.

I groan again.

“Hey, at least you don’t look totally stupid in your picture!” Luffy laughs, shoving the offending poster in my face. I stare down at myself with a grimace, Usopp coming up to look beside me. I squint at something behind me.

“No fucking way,” I deadpan.

Usopp clocks onto what I saw. “NO WAY!” he yells, snatching the poster out of my hands. “That makes *two* wanted posters of me! I’m winning!” he hollers.

There, right behind my goddamn peace sign, is the back of Usopp’s dumb head. “Are you kidding? How do you keep managing this?” I mutter. Doesn't he show up in the back of Zoro’s poster too..?

Usopp just keeps cheering. “Who cares? I’m famous!”

———

Back up on deck Zoro is still napping, Nami is studiously watching her Log Pose beside the railing, and the two bounty hunters are sitting together and whispering to each other on deck.

“Good morning starshine, the earth says hello!” I announce as I climb up. I’m met with confused looks from everyone and sigh to myself. “I forgot none of you would know what that means. Damnit.”

“Would we even want to?” Usopp grouches as he climbs up behind me.

I hum. “Probably not.” I absentmindedly turn back to the sea, rubbing some of the sleep from my eyes. “Hey Vi—” I immediately cut myself off by stretching the ‘e’ sound out.

Shit fuck bitch cocksucker whore—

“—eeeee should we arriving on Whiskey Peak soon, right?”

Perfect save, well done me.

Vivi has this terrible twitching expression of horror on her face and Mr. 9 is looking at me funny, but honestly I think that might have worked!

"…Yeah. Should be under half an hour at this point," 9 says with a squint.

I nod feverishly. "Awesome. Great. Cool. I'm gonna go hide in the galley now bye—" I do just that. I run across the deck, and almost bowl over Sanji as he's stepping outside.

His face lights up when he sees me. "Oh hey Ed! I made rice balls if you want some—"

"COOL AWESOME THANKS SANJI BYE," I yell, slamming the door behind me.

Haha. Oops. I almost blew her two year long deep cover mission just now. I'm just gonna blame the shock and the fact that I just woke up and move on…

I pace around the kitchen for who knows how long before I'm interrupted. "Ed, get out here! We're about to pull up!" Nami calls from outside the door.

I swing it open and drag my feet over to Luffy. "You picked a stupid First Mate," I groan into his shoulder.

He laughs and pats my head. "No way! I picked you, so that isn't true."

I peek up at him. "Your optimism is astounding."

He laughs again, throwing his head back. "I don't know what that word means!"

“Look! The first leg of our journey is over,” Nami announces, pointing a finger at the island coming into view. The strange shapes of gigantic cacti rise big and round on the horizon.

Well, into the snake's nest we sail.

Chapter End Notes

Check out Ed's wanted poster!

Who’d the spyglass belong to? Fuck around and find out.

Also next chapter is… a doozy. So be worried about that.

You may be asking 'Aachria, why did Ed's poster come out so much later than Luffy's?' If you must know, because Ed name dropped Garp during their encounter with Nezumi the Marines had to clear it with him first to make this they really weren't on his payroll. And he thought it was so funny he almost went along with it until he realized they were with Luffy and went 'fuck them kids' and let it go through xoxo.

Chapter 23: Chapter Twenty Three: I Will Never Deserve Peace

Chapter Summary

Peace - Shayfer James

"I'm sure nothing bad will happen to us here at all. Nothing is going to try and kill us," I snicker. Usopp gives me this desperate look of despair that I smirk at.

Chapter Notes

This chapter touches some… heavy topics. So be careful and remember kids, don't underage drink and NEVER leave your drinks unattended in public spaces.

There's drugging, mentions of and allusions to SA (nothing happens in regards to that, to be clear) and all the fun things that come with that stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So this is Whiskey Peak!" Luffy laughs, scrambling up the figurehead.

"Oh thank god we've arrived!" Mr. 9 cries, him and Vivi both jumping up on the bannister. "Now then, we'll be taking our leave!" he says.

"It's been interesting, to say the least," Vivi sneers.

Mr. 9 snorts. "If fate wills it, let's meet again!"

Then they both backflip into the water shouting, "bye bye baby!" and start swimming away from us at top speed.

We all stare in silence for a couple seconds. "…What a couple of weirdos," Nami says.

“Guess we’ll never know what they were up to,” Usopp mutters.

“Who cares? We’re landing!” Luffy cheers.

“There’s a waterway right up ahead, looks like we can dock inland,” Nami observes.

“Did you know one of the reasons merchants used to favour caravels was because they could travel inland like this?” I blurt out.

“Hm?” Usopp hums.

“Caravels were designed specifically to sail windward, which is great for moving goods quickly. The speed they could get around made up for the smaller cargo space,” I continue, squinting into the fog surrounding the river. “They’re fast, but they’re also super fragile. That’s why we gotta be careful with the Merry.” I turn back to the crew to see most of them openly staring at me. I blink.

Shit.

I wave my hands frantically. “Sorry I didn’t mean to go on a tangent, you can just tell me to shut up next time I won’t mind—”

“Ed, no! That’s actually super interesting!” Nami immediately starts backpedalling.

“We’re not annoyed. I just didn’t think you knew anything about boats,” Zoro adds.

“I don’t?” I reply, scrunching my eyebrows.

“But you know all about caravels and their specialties?” Usopp asks with an incredulous laugh.

I frown. “Don’t laugh! I’m more theory than practical application!”

Usopp keeps chuckling. “You’re something else, Ed!”

Oh. That was kind of… nice. People don’t usually react like that when I ramble.

“Anyways, I’m seriously considering the possibility of monsters out there,” Usopp changes the subject, a new shake in his voice.

“It’s definitely possible. This is the Grand Line,” Sanji agrees around his cigarette.

Luffy just laughs. “No worries, if we find monsters we can just leave!” he offers.

“Uh, no,” Nami cuts in, “don’t forget we have to wait for the Log Pose to reset between islands. It could be hours or even days!”

“Or years,” I add, wiggling my eyebrows.

Usopp clutches at his hair, pale and sweating. “But then if there *are* monsters we can’t leave?! And *years?!* Stop talking out of your ass!” he shrieks.

“Let’s not worry about the monsters until we have to. Let’s just go already!” Luffy declares, his big smile infectious.

“Can’t believe I’m saying this, but I agree,” Zoro states.

“I’ll keep Nami and Ed safe!” Sanji announces.

“Guys, I think I contracted a Can’t-Enter-Islands-Disease,” Usopp whimpers, sweat rolling down his face.

“I’m sure nothing bad will happen to us here at all. Nothing is going to try and kill us,” I snicker. Usopp gives me this desperate look of despair that I smirk at.

Nami sighs. “Fuck it. We’re going in,” she announces.

We sail up through the mist covered river, and start to hear the low thrum of people. The mist remains too thick to see through right up until the cheering starts.

“Welcome to Whiskey Peak!”

“Pirates are here!”

“Welcome to the Grand Line!”

The banks are completely covered in people. Men, women, children, they’re all cheering and shouting joyfully at us. The crew around me makes sounds of awe, leaning over the rails to take it in better. Not me. I shrink back from the performative welcome.

As we dock beside the river bank and disembark, I make eye contact with Zoro. He raises an eyebrow at my obvious discomfort and I dart my eyes around the crowd, lingering on people obviously concealing weapons. He blinks back in understanding.

I lock the unease and distrust behind a mask of awe and bashfulness. I can see Zoro do a double take at my acting out of the corner of my eye, but I've already moved on to standing

beside Luffy.

If there's one thing being myself has taught me, it's masking.

"Welc — *cough* ma-ma-maaa~ Welcome. My name is Igarappoi. It's my honour as mayor to welcome you to Whiskey Peak," a man with huge hair curlers says, stepping forward out of the crowd with a saxophone in hand.

Igarappoi — Are you kidding? I forgot how fucking bad his code name was. Fucking Igaram.

"Okay. I'm Luffy. Nice to meet you. Nice hair, I like the curls," he giggles, tugging on my sleeve and pointing.

Igaram's face doesn't budge an inch from the cordial smile he's wearing. "Whiskey Peak is a town that thrives on making liquor and music. Hospitality is our middle name! If it's fine liquor you want, we have an oceans worth. Would you let us throw a party in your honour so you can tell us — *hack* ma-ma-maaa~ tell us the tales of your adventure?"

"Gladly!" Sanji, Usopp and Luffy shout, hooking their arms around each other's necks and pulling me in too. They drag me laughing and dancing into the throng of cheering people as the sun starts to set.

———

My first hour of the party is spent denying drinks and not much more. I explain that I don't drink alcohol no less than twenty times and *no,* I'm not going to change my mind and *no,* not even just a sip and *no,* I'm not going to make a damn exception. Fucking people.

About an hour or two in, they finally get the memo and start shoving dishes at me instead. Knowing the food is probably laced with some shit does wonders to keep my appetite reigned in. At least, right up until Luffy notices I'm not eating anything.

“Ed! They’re giving us food! Eat this!” he yells. When I turn to ask him what he’s talking about, he shoves a handful of shrimp tempura down my throat. I choke a little and resist the urge to spit it out immediately.

God, did they drug all the food here? Because if so that’s such a damn waste! That was delicious!

I swallow what Luffy almost choked me with, then send him a soft glare. “Luffy, these people would have killed Laboon for food. I’m not gonna eat more of theirs than I have to.”

He furrows his brow at me and stares contemplatively at a chicken leg. Then he shrugs and shoves it in his mouth anyways. “Well they’re giving it to us. Doesn't matter either way.” I roll my eyes at him as he runs to get more food.

Usopp crashes into my side, laughing loudly in my ear. “Ed! Why aren’t you partying?”

I give him a plastic grin. “I am partying! The only thing that could make this more of a party is the Macarena,” I say sarcastically.

A loud boisterous laugh comes from beside us as Luffy, still shoving food in his mouth, comes bowling over again. “I know that one! C’mon Ed! Dance dance dance!” He grabs me by the arms and pulls me toward himself while pointing at the band. “Gimme a beat!”

They look a little confused and start playing a simple 4/4 beat for him.

“Perfect!” he grins, white teeth on broad display. Then he starts doing the Macarena. Like the actual honest to god Macarena. I, completely unconsciously through the power of muscle memory or something, start doing it as well.

The confusion has not left my face. “How the fuck do you know the Macarena?” I ask incredulously, jumping in place and turning at the same time Luffy does.

He laughs. “Shanks taught me!”

Why does that not answer any questions? What the fuck.

We dance (if you can really call it that) together for maybe five minutes before he’s abruptly running off again to eat more food. I wander my way over to a chair and face plant into a table with a groan.

“Are you alright?” a lady’s voice asks me.

“Am I?” I answer right back, not bothering to lift my head.

“Do you need some water, honey?” she asks with a giggle.

“Probably,” I groan back. My hand is lifted off the table and a mug is pressed into it.

I raise my head to check out the mug. The water looks clear and untampered with so I throw caution to the wind and take a swig. No strange flavours jump out at me so I down some more.

The lady laughs. “I guess all that dancing wore you down! I hope you wouldn't be opposed to another one, with me,” she says with a smile. She looks around my age, honey coloured hair framing deep brown eyes and wearing a cute polka dotted dress.

I smirk up at her. “For a sweetheart like you? Never.” I let her pull me, drink still in hand, onto the dance floor as the band starts playing another song. They strike up something almost like a mix between a shanty and swing music, however the hell they accomplish that.

“What kind of dance do you know?” she asks me, draping her arms across my shoulders.

I shrug, placing my free hand on her waist. “Swing and salsa, mostly. I know the entire dance to Rasputin, ironically. How about you?”

She keeps up a steady conversation with me as we twirl around the room, I end up talking so much I drain my mug dry. When she notices I’m finished with it she hands it off to another couple dancing nearby and takes my hand in hers to continue our dance.

Then the world starts tilting strangely and my words start to slur together. I start missing steps of our dance and nearly lose my grip on her hand several times because of the tremors running through my arms.

Oh fuck…

Evil bitch drugged my fucking water.

I rip my shaking hands out of hers. “I’m gon’ go si’down…” I mumble around my heavy tongue. I can’t even make her expression out through the blurry film covering my vision.

I somehow manage to stumble into a couch, and slide down onto it. Everything around me feels like syrup, sliding through my brain and out my ears. I slump down onto the lap of the person beside me.

Damn, got Rohypnoled. Stupid stupid stupid…

I try to blink back the static to find a familiar face. The first one I see is right above me.

Sanji stares down at me with a dopey smile, cheeks flushed red from atmosphere or alcohol. “Heeeey Ed!” he laughs, a clumsy hand coming down to card through my hair.

Oh thank god, of all the people I could bump into. Sanji’s weird ‘protect the precious’ instincts will probably keep weirdos away.

“Heeeey Sanji… Y’mind w’tchn m’for sec’nd..?” I slur back, tongue feeling like a lead weight in my mouth. His smile softens and I think he mumbles something back, but the rhythmic brushing of his fingers on my scalp has me dropping off the brink of consciousness before I can get an answer.

———

The loud oppressive beat of club music invades my synapses. I don’t have to think for a second before I know where I am. I immediately turn away from the bar to tumble onto the dance floor.

The technicolour lights send me stumbling into dancing partygoers. My fingers are numb and the universe is folding in on itself around me. I call my sister's name into the crowd. God knows how long I stay alone in that throng of people.

A hand clamps on my wrist. I look up into the blurred and worried eyes of my sister. My name sounds foreign from her mouth, something not quite mine anymore. An ill fitting jacket or knit sweater catching on my skin like hooks into soft flesh.

I mumble her name. I tell her what happened, in short slurred words. A guy at the bar. Looked away from my drink for half a second. Wouldn’t leave me alone. Started feeling weird. Her face hardens.

“Let’s go home,” echoes through my ear canal, “this was a shit idea.”

I nod into her arm. “Told y’fifteen s’too young f’ra bar…” slides out of my mouth.

The cool night air is a blessing on my skin for not nearly long enough before I'm gently shoved into the front seat of my sister's hand-me-down Audi.

"We can just sit in my room and eat ice cream next time, yeah?" her smooth voice comforts.

With all the strength of a newborn I tilt my head so I can see her soft face. "M'sorry," I mumble.

She raises an eyebrow. "For getting drugged?"

"No," I answer, "for dad."

The corners of my vision start to glitch and fade away like bad video game graphics. The expression on my sister's face shifts. Her party makeup melts, her face ages, her dyed hair fades.

My name once again spills unfamiliar between her teeth. "Poor idiot. That hasn't happened yet."

I furrow my brow best I can through my face's numbness. "Wha..?"

"You're fifteen and I'm nineteen right now. We're sixteen and twenty when you tear our family to shreds." The words sting like salt in an open wound.

"M'sorry—" I mumble again, desperate even as things start to burn like an overdeveloped photo.

"No,"

“No you’re not.”

_____

The second I feel awareness tingle at the edges of my consciousness, I grab onto it with all my might. I drag myself through the lingering haze to pry my eyes open. My vision is full of worn red fabric and I can feel the rhythmic thumping of running through my stomach. I try and turn my head to see what’s going on, making a soft groan.

“Sorry Ed! We gotta go!” Luffy’s voice filters through the miasma.

The ringing in my ears recedes, and I can hear Usopp and Sanji screaming at Luffy. I force my numb hands to grip onto Luffy’s vest and I crunch my eyelids together, pressing my face into his back.

“...Ed?” he repeats, slightly more hesitantly.

“I’m fine,” I hiss into the fabric. My voice is hoarse and I can feel the walls of my throat rubbing together like sandpaper.

Cottonmouth. Nausea. Headache. Muscle pain.

I muffle a desperate curse into my Captain’s back. “I’m fine,” I repeat, more trying to convince myself than him. He slows down just a bit. I smack my palm into his back. “Don’t stop! Keep going!” I order. He does. I finally register that I'm slung over his shoulder.

Piece of crap! Who the hell roofied me? I can’t remember shit!

“Zoro, I brought the guys! Ed isn’t doing so hot!” Luffy hollers. I cringe away from the yell, hunching into my arms. There’s more yelling from who I think is Nami and Vivi, then I’m being slowly lowered from Luffy's shoulder.

Fuck, ok. Gotta keep it together for a few minutes. At least until we’re out of here.

...Why do I have to do that again?

The loud noises come to an abrupt end as there’s two loud thonks beside me, then a gentle hand lands on my shoulder. I startle and look up at Nami, who’s looking down at me worriedly.

“I’m fine,” I say again.

She doesn’t look convinced. I stumble up to my feet, grabbing onto her shoulder for support. “You sure..?” she asks, sounding like she’s already made up her mind that I’m not.

“Positive,” I grit out, eyes squinting as the fog starts to lift and the sun starts to rise.

I do a double take when I notice the person sized duck on our ship, before remembering *oh yeah that’s Vivi’s duck friend Karoo.* Why can’t my head clear up already?

“Congratulations on your escape. And be careful not to crash your ship into the rocks,” a voice like silk says from behind us.

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll take care of it,” Nami says. Then she pauses.

We all spin back as the voice says again, “what a nice ship.”

Sitting on the balcony railing, ankles crossed in a skimpy purple cowgirl getup, is a smirking woman with piercing blue eyes and shoulder length black hair.

"Ah," I mutter, "you."

Nico Robin stares down at us with a smile. "I just ran into Mr. 8 a little while ago, he didn't look so good," she comments.

Vivi mumbles something that's drowned out by Luffy's shouting. "What're you doing on our ship?! Who're you?!"

"What're you doing all the way out here, Miss All-Sunday?!" Vivi yells.

"Who's partner is she?" Nami questions panickedly from beside me.

"The very top," I mumble, "Mr. 0, Crocodile."

Everyone's eyes snap to me in an instant. "How do you know that..?" Vivi asks, horror infused in every note.

Eh?

Oh. ***Shit.***

"It's a bit obvious, isn't it?" I say, shaky smirk slapped on my face. "I mean, a princess undercover in an agency like Baroque Works? A princess from *Alabasta* no less? And a Warlord taking up residence in that country just before all its troubles start? For an organization with 'mystery' as its motto, you sure are transparent."

My stupid ass is still half asleep! Everyone better have bought that.

Nico Robin stares down at me impassively. “Well done. It took letting Miss Wednesday tail me for her to figure it out.” Vivi makes a choking noise.

“So she’s a good guy?” Luffy mumbles.

“I knew that! And I bet you’re the one who told him his identity was leaked!” Vivi shrieks.

“So she’s a bad guy,” Luffy huffs.

“Just what is your objective?!” Vivi continues.

Robin breathes out a laugh. “You just looked so desperate to figure it out. It was amusing, the idea of a princess believing she can take on the entire Baroque Works organization and save her kingdom. And to think it only took E. D. Domino a couple minutes of impaired thinking to outclass you,” she snarks.

Vivi’s anger turns to fury. “Don’t underestimate me!” she roars. Everyone around me draws their weapons at once. Usopp and Sanji flank Robin, slingshot and pistol from god knows where pointed at her head.

Seriously, where the fuck did Sanji get that gun?

I realize with a start I have my own pistol out and pointed as well. I can’t even remember drawing the damn thing… What the *hell* did that bitch give me?

“Hey, do you know what's going on?” Usopp asks.

“No. But this woman is a threat to my lovely Miss Wednesday!” Sanji responds.

Then the two of them are unceremoniously tossed over the railing by Robin's Devil Fruit powers.

“Would you mind not pointing those at me?” she intones, a bored look on her face.

Nami’s staff, Zoro’s sword, and my pistol are all slapped out of our hands. Everyone makes exclamations of shock, and I move up to stand behind my Captain.

“You can all calm down, I’m under no orders here, and have no reason to fight you,” she says with a smirk. She turns to regard Luffy. “So you’re the Captain. I’ve heard so much about you, Monkey D. Luffy.”

I see the hand sprout from Luffy's back and reach for his hat. I snap my arm out lightning fast and smack it away.

One day Nico Robin is someone I will gladly call friend and family. That day is not today.

“Hands off,” I growl.

Robin regards me with another cold and calculating look, amused smile still fixed in place. “My my, aren’t you the observant one?” She tilts her head. “Then maybe you’ll listen to this. Your next stop is an island called Little Garden.”

I glare up at her. “What of it?”

She keeps smiling. “Even if I didn’t lay a single finger on you here, that destination would still keep you from ever reaching Alabasta.”

I don’t budge an inch. “Is that so?”

She flicks a finger and an Eternal Pose flies into Vivi’s hands. “You can skip past Little Garden with that. The island that Pose points to is uninhabited, and located right before Alabasta. Moreover, the route isn’t known to Baroque Works, so you won’t be chased.”

“So she *is* good?” Nami mumbles incredulously.

“Why would you give this to me?!” Vivi demands.

“It’s probably a trap,” Zoro comments.

Robin continues to stare down at us impassively. “I wonder about that…”

“Forget your thingy! We don’t need it!” Luffy announces, grabbing the Pose from Vivi’s hands and shattering it in his fist. Everyone around me chokes, but I continue staring up at Robin through still blurry eyes.

I wonder…

What did she actually have to gain from giving us that?

Nami nails Luffy in the face with a kick. “ARE YOU AN IDIOT?!” she shrieks. “She went out of her way to give us a safer route! What if she actually is a good person?!”

Luffy glares up at Robin. “Don’t you dare think you can choose the path of our journey!”

Robin blinks down at him. “...I see. How unfortunate.” Nami makes more strangled shrieks and bops Luffy on the head again.

“She blew up that funny tube hair guy, so I hate her!” he proclaims, still glaring at Robin.

“I’m sorry to hear that. If you survive, I hope that we meet again,” Robin says, suavely making her way across the deck.

“No!” Luffy grouches.

“Miss All-Sunday,” I call. My throat is absolutely fried and I think she can see how bloodshot my eyes are. She looks at me with something akin to pity in her dark eyes. “Watch your back,” I say quietly.

Her eyes flash with something indecipherable. “You as well, Detective,” she croons. Between one blink and the next, she’s jumped over the rail and onto the giant fucking turtle we hadn’t noticed earlier.

The crew makes sounds of awe around me and Usopp and Sanji start asking about what happened. I’m hit with a solid wall of vertigo and start swaying in place. As the adrenaline of the situation wears off, I slump down, almost collapse, onto the person nearest me.

“Woah! Ed are you ok?” Usopp asks panickedly, his arms coming up to support me. I mumble something under my breath. “Huh?” he questions.

“I said I’m gonna hurl,” I repeat, though it’s muffled through my hands.

“What?! Don’t do it on me!”

The nausea gets worse as I’m suddenly manhandled across the ship and my face is shoved in a bucket.

“WAIT WE CLEAN WITH THAT BUCKET—”

Chapter End Notes

Plot, lots of plot. When I said this saga was gonna suck for Ed I meant it. This is just the start of terrible things for them ahaha.

How did Shanks teach Luffy the Macarena? Because it's fucking funny. Ed dancing is something that can be so personal—

Counterfeit Arcade by Shayfer James is such a damn good album. His shit is gonna pop up a lot lmao.

Chapter 24: Chapter Twenty Four: Tell Me I’m Right, And Let The Sun Rain Down On Me

Chapter Summary

Mona Lisa - Panic! At the Disco

I stare at him. “I just vomited all over your shoes, I look like I smoked an entire pot field, and I can barely hold this damn cup. *Obviously I was drugged!”*

Chapter Notes

You get this extra long chapter a day early because I’m going to the beach tomorrow!! I’m going to get so fucking sunburnt I just know it.

Got normal burnt by a hot thing at work AGAIN. I wear safety gear y'all I'm just fuckin stupid.

Aachria stop writing hurt/comfort and actually progress the plot challenge. Also please god I promise I like Vivi. I love her and her character is amazing. Just… keep that in mind for the rest of the saga I beg—

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once all the contents of my stomach are expelled and I’ve been cleaned up, we all reconvene outside on the upper deck. Sanji pushes a mug full of ginger tea at me and Luffy has pressed himself so far into my side we may as well be a singular entity.

“So…” I start, spinning my mug in my hands, “what exactly happened?”

Vivi, Nami and Zoro all share glances before Nami takes initiative and starts explaining. “Uh, so basically… We were in a nest of bounty hunters who wanted to kill us and sell our heads to the government.”

I roll my eyes and take a sip of my tea. “I knew that, I mean what happened while I was drugged.”

“I’m sorry you got WHAT?” Usopp gapes.

I stare at him. “I just vomited all over your shoes, I look like I smoked an entire pot field, and I can barely hold this damn cup. *Obviously I was drugged!”*

“We can unpack that later. All you need to know is I kicked major ass, and I got you this,” Zoro says smugly, tossing me a small pouch. I peek inside and yup, it’s money. 8,000 berri to be exact.

“Did you steal this off a dead guy?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

“Also Nami promised this random girl we’d save her country for money. By the way, how —”

Zoro is cut off by Vivi slamming her hands into the rail and glaring at me. “How the hell did you know who I was?!” She gives me this suspicious once over and narrows her eyes. “Are you a spy for Baroque Works?!”

I give her the most flat expression I can manage. “Yes. I’m a spy who joined this random guy in the middle of the East Blue knowing I’d eventually find you, a shame you discovered my evil plot.”

I raise my eyebrow. She glares harder.

I give her a slow obvious once over to mimic hers. “I read the newspaper. Princess Vivi is currently ‘missing’, and you have bright blue hair that goes down to your ass. You’re not exactly inconspicuous.” Her face goes red and Usopp snrks under his breath

“Moving on,” Nami grumbles. “Some stealing on my part and some fighting on Zoro’s later, these two weirdos showed up.”

Zoro nods, scratching his chin. “Some lemon girl and a dude. I think me and Luffy beat them?”

Nami rolls her eyes into the back of her skull. “More like they got caught in the crossfire. Our great idiot of a Captain tried to fight Zoro because he thought he beat everyone up for no reason!” Nami groans. I pause mid sip of my tea.

Oh, I forgot about that.

“Luffy?” I say seriously to the boy leaning into my side. He scooches a couple inches back so we’re face to face. I look back and forth between him and Zoro, settling on my Captain. “I want to make something perfectly clear to you.” I harden my face. “You never, *never* seriously fight your crewmates with the intent to harm unless they’ve done something truly heinous and unforgivable. Am I understood?”

They both nod solemnly in unison. “Yes Ed, sorry Ed.”

I relax and pull Luffy back into my side. “Wonderful. What happened next?”

“Then that mean lady blew up the trumpet guy!” Luffy spits.

“I thought he had a saxophone?” I mumble.

“Either way I hate her,” Luffy grouches.

“You seemed to know exactly who she was and what was going on earlier, why are you asking questions now?” Vivi demands, still glaring at me.

The hell did I do to piss her off so bad?

“I mean… I’ve mastered the art of pretending I know everything, and you guys are very easy to read, so…” I offer, frowning down at my tea.

“And Miss All-Sunday? You just happen to know who she was when she showed up?” Vivi presses.

I glare back at her. “I’d be kind of stupid not to. Even if she’s much older, any idiot with a pair of eyes would recognize the goddamn Devil Child, Nico Robin.”

Nami and Zoro choke. Usopp slams his face into the railing. Vivi’s face goes white.

“Who?” Luffy questions, sticking a finger in my tea and licking it then making a face.

“Don’t worry about it,” I answer, moving my cup away from him.

“Are we just gonna move past that?” Usopp wheezes into the wood.

I take another long draw of my tea. “Yup. I think I got the gist, folks. Thanks for the catch up.” Wait… isn’t Mr. 5 supposed to fuck with our rum that sabatoges Dorry while we were there? “Hey, are we sure the ship didn’t get tampered with while we were…indisposed?”

Usopp makes a thoughtful face. “I’ll check it out in a bit. If anything is moved or missing I’ll let everybody know.”

There’s nods all around, then silence on the ship for a few seconds.

Vivi shifts uncomfortably. “Is it really alright that I’m on your ship? I’m causing you a lot of trouble…” she mutters.

Nami gets right up in her face with a raised eyebrow. “It’s a little late for that, dontcha think? If you didn’t want to cause us trouble you shouldn’t have told us who you were!”

Vivi grimaces. “Sorry for that.”

Nami tosses a look over her shoulder at Luffy, who’s still shoved into my side. “Ain’t that right, Captain?”

He throws up a hand and announces “Yeah! I’m hungry too!”

I throw up a heavy arm as well. “Agreed! Food! Salmon if we have it!”

Sanji immediately jumps up and twirls across the deck. “I’ll get right to work!”

Zoro sighs. “Either way, it looks like our destination is set.”

Usopp’s eyes shift nervously between us. “B — but remember what that lady said? Are we gonna die?!”

Luffy laughs. “Who knows? Let’s go!”

We all nod without hesitation. “Right!”

_____

After eating a delicious drug free meal, courtesy of Sanji (it was salmon, bless that man), I’m dragged off into the mens room by Luffy. We’re followed by Nami Sanji and Zoro, while Usopp drags Vivi with him to check the ship.

“Why is this room always so filthy?” Nami complains, gingerly stepping over something or other Usopp had left out.

Zoro carelessly kicks it to the side on his way down. “Don’t lecture us, you’re the guest here.”

She shoots him a glare. “And Ed isn’t?”

Zoro rolls his eyes and flops down onto the couch. “Please, Whenever Luffy isn’t shoved in the bed with Ed in your room, they’re crashing with him on *our* couch.”

Luffy all but tosses me on top of Zoro. We both make matching “oof!”s he ignores in favour of flopping down on top of us.

“Dual residency,” I wheeze into the couch cushions.

After some shuffling and no small amount of manhandling, I’m shoved back first into Zoro’s chest with Luffy splayed out on my stomach and curled up legs. Even more shuffling and finagling (and some kicking, if I’m being honest) later, we end up with Sanji sitting right beside us with Luffy’s legs across his lap, and Nami crunched into the end of the couch.

“Guys this is very impractical. This couch was not made for this many people,” I sigh, flicking Luffy’s hat out of my face.

“You’re telling me,” Nami grumbles, elbowing Sanji in the side to get him to smoosh over.

“Alright you little shits, what’s this about,” I ask, glancing at each of their faces suspiciously. Each of them I can see look away and start whistling like they’re trying to act inconspicuous. Zoro’s hands come from behind my head and clamp over my eyes. “Hey—”

“Ed, we wanna talk about what just happened,” Nami interrupts me. I still, my hands freeze where I was reaching up to move Zoro’s.

Shit shit shit shit they know they know shit fuck shit—

“We’re really worried about you,” she continues.

“What would you have to be worried about..?” I ask, a shake in my voice and a nervous smile stretched across my lips I hope they don’t gauge.

Sanji sighs. “Ed, please.” A hand reaches out and grabs mine, though I can’t tell who. “What happened to you back there obviously really got to you. We just wanna help,” Sanji says, a pleading edge to his voice.

Oh they mean the drugging thing, thank god.

...

WAIT, I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT THAT EITHER!

“It’s fine you guys, just leave it—”

“You keep saying that,” Luffy interrupts me, voice stern and tone unwavering. “You always say it’s fine, but it’s not. We want you to *talk* to us.” I gulp.

Oh god, am I ready for this kind of conversation?

“I—”

“Ed,” this time Zoro interrupts me, “some polka dot chick said she gave you enough of whatever it was to knock out a *horse.* You bottle enough up as it is. Let us help with this at least.”

Dear god, Mr. Emotional Constipation himself is worried. I must have looked fucking terrible.

My expression crumples under his hands. I slump back into his chest, pulling Luffy with me. “That wasn’t… the first time that’s happened,” I say quietly. The hand holding might tightens, and I feel Zoro tense beneath me. “Nothing bad happened, I had someone taking care of me,” I quickly add, which has Nami letting out a sigh of relief. “When I was 15, my sister took me to a bar because we thought it would be fun. It — uh, wasn’t. Some guy spiked my drink and my sister had to take me home,” I explain, burying my hands in Luffy’s hair under his hat.

“I thought you didn't like your sister,” Luffy mumbles into my knees.

I sigh. “No, I love her. We just… had something of a falling out. I made some — let's call them *selfish* choices that kinda… tore my family apart. She stopped wanting to talk to me after that.” My crewmates are silent around me. “Not like it matters now. It’s not like I’ll ever see them again,” I mutter into the crown of Luffy’s head. Zoro uses the leverage of his hands on my face to yank my head back.

I blink from the sudden change of brightness and stare up into Zoro's serious face. "We like talking to you," he declares. I blink at him again.

"And we don't think you're selfish, either," Sanji pipes up, shaking my hand, which I realise he's the one holding.

"At least you can't be more selfish than me," Luffy states, staring up at me with those big black eyes of his.

"And we're not gonna let anything like this ever happen to you again," Nami announces fiercely.

I blink a couple more times, wet clinging to my lashes. "Oh," I say softly. Nami suddenly throws herself across all of us, kicking Sanji in the arm and completely squishing Luffy into my knees so she can throw her arms around me, accidentally punching Zoro in the face too.

"Ow!"

"Hey!"

"Ough!"

All the boys yell.

I can't help it. I burst into a terrible combination of ugly sobbing and wheezing laughter. We turn into a horrible amalgamation of twisting limbs and squirming that sends us all crashing off the couch to the cabin floor.

The rambunctious laughter doesn't stop for a second.

“Fuck, I love you guys!”

_____

After that, I lock myself in the ladies cabin to finish what I had started the other day.

My Transponder rings for a beat before a familiar voice comes through. “Yeah?”

I nervously laugh. “Hi Jonah, sorry about uh… last time… But! I’d like to *actually* cash that favour in now!”

There’s a long sigh from the snail. “Are you actually calling me back?” he groans.

I laugh again. “Yeah… Well I got roofied yesterday and I’m riding an emotional high so my inhibitions are all outta whack and I feel like this is a great idea.”

There’s a short silence. “...What?”

“Don’t worry about it. Anyways, if I gave you a list of bounty hunters and some dumb codenames they go by, would you be able to get me pictures of them?”

Jonah pauses. “What makes you think we have pictures of bounty hunters?”

I snort. “Oh please, *Intel* and *Bounty* Division? Of course you keep an eye on potential threats. A bounty hunter is just one minor inconvenience away from a pirate.” Zoro is proof enough of that.

He chuckles. “I can’t say you’re wrong. Second question; why do you think I’ll help you?”

I hum. “Well first of all, you owe me that favour and you said yes so we’re bonded for life now, and secondly… I am very pretty and I want you to?”

I’ll admit, not my finest persuasion. But I’m tired! And trying!!

“...Fine. I don’t care enough to say no,” Jonah sighs.

I whoop and jump up in my chair. “Wonderful! I’ll be honest I only know a handful of their real names so I hope your office is up to date on epithets! Let's start with… Galdino, Mr. 3.”

_____

An hour or so later, I have a comprehensive list of names and abilities for each of the important figures in Baroque Works, and Jonah has a file of all their pictures ready to send to me.

“For my own sake I’m not going to ask any questions about what you’re doing,” he mutters. The snail gives me a pointed look. “You should really invest in a fax snail if you want this to be a regular thing.”

I hum. “Maybe, but making you pay airfare is kind of funny.”

Mr. President, wearing a facsimile of Jonah’s face, glares at me. “You annoy me.”

I wink. “It’s my specialty.”

Mr. Presidents face morphs as a new voice, muffled from distance, says something I can’t decipher. Then it morphs back to Jonah’s bored face. “Yeah, sure. Sorry Ed, I gotta go. I’ll get those pictures sent in a second.”

There’s a click, and then the President's face is settling back into its own sleepy expression. “Sorry bud, that took way longer than I expected,” I mumble, stretching out my back.

There’s a knock on the hatch above me and Usopp’s voice calls down, “Ed! Sanji made drinks! Come up here!”

Once I get up to the deck, a bright orange drink is passed to me. I nod my thanks to Sanji, who twirls away to pass drinks to Vivi and Nami.

Usopp waves me over as I take a sip. “We didn’t find anything during our sweep of the ship except a barrel of utility alcohol that we tossed. It had some weird shit in it,” he tells me.

Boom motherfucker, plot point avoided. Take that, canon.

...

Wait wasn’t I trying not to fuck up the canon?

...Oops.

I grin and smack him on the back. “Wonderful job, Brave Warrior!”

He bats his eyelashes back. “I do try, First Mate.”

Nami rolls her eyes at our antics. “The wind keeps stopping, so it might take a while to get to Little Garden,” she says, stirring her drink.

I nod. “That’s actually good, I wanna catch you guys up to speed on what I was working on down there.” That catches everyone else's attention.

“So we finally get to see your secret project?” Usopp says, wiggling his eyebrows.

I plop down on the deck and spread out the sheets I had brought up. “Yessir! You’ll have to make do without visuals for now, my pal should be sending some soon.”

As my crewmates close in and start sitting in some loose approximation of a circle around me, Nami leans forward and grabs a sheet. “I didn’t know you had other friends,” she muses, smirking at me over the paper.

I snatch it from her hands with a glare. “Rude. Anyway, I figured we just stick with the top brass and officer agents we were most likely to have trouble with the closer we get to Alabasta.” I flip the paper around and start pointing out names. “Let’s start with… The Unluckies. Miss Friday who’s a vulture, and Mr. 13 who’s an otter. They’re like the high speed messaging system for Baroque works, they probably took pictures of you guys to Crocodile. Then there’s Gem and Mikita, also known as Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine. I think you met them already back on Whiskey Peak.” I actually hadn’t known their names before Jonah found them, so that’s cool.

“Yeah… Booger guy and lemon girl,” Zoro says, snapping his fingers.

I nod. “Yup, both Devil Fruit users as well. She can change her body weight at will and he can make explosives… out of his boogers.”

It’s such a stupid application of an objectively very strong Devil Fruit… What was this guy on?

“Next up, Babe and Drophy, or Mr. 4 and Miss Merry Christmas. She’s got a Zoan Devil Fruit that turns her into a mole. The guy is one of the few officer agents without a Fruit, but his gun does have one.” There’s looks of confusion from the whole group. “It’s a gun. That ate a Devil fruit. And is now also a dog,” I elaborate. They do not look any less confused. “Whatever, moving on. Next up, and probably most important right now, Mr. 3 and Miss

Goldenweek, Galdino and Marianne. He’s got the Wax Wax Fruit, and she can fuck with emotions using paint. Don’t ask me how that works — I don’t know.”

Nami raises an eyebrow from beside a rapidly souring Vivi. “Why are they the most important right now?”

I pull out another sheet. “My pal mentioned that their ship is the current closest to Little Garden, so they're most likely to catch up to us when we land there.”

She nods. “That makes sense. But knowing their abilities should make fighting them a lot easier, right?”

There’s a sudden squawk above us, and then an envelope and a newspaper smack into the deck in the middle of our makeshift circle. We all look up just in time to see a News Coo speeding off. I grab at the envelope and open it up.

Inside I find a pristine stack of pictures. I blink once. I blink twice. “Am I on crack or was that way too fast?”

Zoro pats me on the back. “Never underestimate the mail service.”

Excuse — what the fuck?

Ok. Sure.

“...Right. So this is Mr. 3 and Miss Goldenweek. Keep an eye out for them,” I say, holding up their pictures.

Vivi’s face has gone entirely red. “How did you get all of this figured out?” she asks, eye twitching.

I shrug. “I know a guy. Besides,” I shuffle through the stack until I find Crocodile’s wanted poster from before he was a Warlord, which I asked Jonah to include, “it’s an organization built on secrecy, this was handmade for me to tear down.”

“I spent *two years* undercover and didn’t get half this much… You sure are uh — something else,” she grits out.

I toss my head like I’m flipping my hair. “Thank you darling, I just love a good mystery. It’s like a puzzle game.”

“Don’t get too carried away with your ‘mystery’, my country is still in danger…” she mutters, worrying at her lower lip. I shoot a look at Zoro and shrug again.

“Well, why don’t we retire to the galley for some lunch, hm?” Sanji asks, getting to his feet and offering me a hand. I shove all my papers into the envelope and take it.

Nami grabs the newspaper on her way up. “Am I the only person who finds it ridiculous that the morning paper doesn’t even get here until the afternoon?” she grouch as we make our way up the stairs.

“Considering this is the Grand Line, we should just be thankful we get it at all,” Vivi says with a smile. Then she gives me a slightly less enthused look. “Could I get a copy of all of that?”

I shrug and nod. “Yeah, you can just have these once we’re done. We can go over the rest once we get closer to Alabasta.”

As we sit at the table, the sweet smell of Sanji’s cooking fills the space. I start drumming out a beat on the table with my fingers. Luffy zeros his eye in on them and smacks a palm on the table as well. “We still need a musician!” he announces.

Zoro scoffs but I just point at him. “True! Music is super important. Don’t underestimate that shit, the impact of a good entrance or the mood of a room are all in the hands of the guy making the soundtrack. Back where I’m from, music is a big deal.”

WAIT.

My eyes bug out and I slam my hands into the table. “Oh *shit!* I just realized I’ll never get to listen to any music from home again!” Nami and Zoro wince. I smother my face in my hands with a low groan. “And thus Mitski is lost to the void… Never again will I hear Frank Sinatra…” I remove my hands to look up at our cook as he delivers a dish to the table. “You’d love him Sanji, he’s got this beautiful crooning voice and his songs are so romantic. Real classy gentleman’s music.”

He smiles with his eyebrow raised. “Maybe this musician we’ll be getting can play it some day.”

I give him a dull look. “They won’t know it. Shit man, you guys’ll never listen to All Star as it was intended. That’s sad.”

This is making me incredibly upset. Never again will I cry on the bathroom floor listening to Lana Del Ray. This *sucks.*

“It’s fine Ed, we can listen to new music!” Luffy comforts, sliding a half empty plate to me. Nami starts flipping open the newspaper and makes a quiet gasp.

“Something catch your eye?” Vivi asks with a smile.

“Uh — not really,” Nami replies, quickly flipping the page.

Luffy reaches back for the plate I’ve mostly cleared off and does a double take at the paper. “Mmmh! Zoro, Ed look!”

Nami raises an eyebrow. “What? It’s just some Marine guy?”

I lunge across the table to catch a peek. There in black and white is our little idiot Coby, tears running down his face and wrapped around an also crying Helmeppo. “That’s not just any Marine guy, that’s Coby!” Luffy says joyfully.

“Hah! He made it as a Marine!” I laugh.

“Coby..? He’s that friend of yours you mentioned the other day, right?” Nami asks, moving the paper so we can see it better.

“Yeah! What’s it say?” Luffy asks, leaving in further. I pull the last of the plate away so he doesn't kneel on it as he squirms across the table.

“Ah… Vice Admiral Garp’s warship has arrived at Marine Headquarters. The picture shown here was taken right after they crossed Reverse Mountain. Just as expected, Vice Admiral Garp was relaxed and in control. Some young Marines did not fare as well,” she reads off.

“Woah… So Coby has entered the Grand Line,” Luffy awes.

“It said Marine Headquarters. Not bad,” Zoro muses.

I burst into cackles. “And you see who’s ship he’s on?! Poor Coby!”

Luffy squints at the picture, then shivers. “Poor Coby…” he repeats.

The others give us odd looks but I just pat Luffy on the back as he crawls back across the table to shove himself between me and Zoro.

_____

"Ok, who wants to call their loved ones first?" I announce after dinner.

Usopp's hand shoots right up. "Me!"

I nod. "A call to Kaya in Syrup Village it is. C'mon, you're getting special permission to chill in the gal's lounge for this."

Usopp whoops as he follows me down. I set the President up at the desk while Usopp makes himself comfortable on the bed. "Is the bed Nami's, or do you guys like… switch out?" he questions.

"Mind your own business. Hey Kaya!" I sing as Mr. President's face morphs into a sweet smile.

"Ed! I've been waiting for a call!" Kaya's voice filters through, a hint of static clinging to the edges.

Usopp lunges off the bed to snatch the transponder from my hand. "Hi Kaya! I'm here too!" he shouts into the mic.

I snatch it back from his hands with a glare. "You don't have to yell, Jesus. Ground rules before we start, please keep any… sensitive information to a minimum. I'm 80% sure we're being followed by a smokin' hot Marine Captain guy and we're probably being wiretapped."

That's how Smoker finds out about Baroque Works in the first place, right? He's got a black Transponder Snail that picks up Sanji and Crocodiles call, I think? Better safe than sorry.

“Does this have anything to do with your fancy new wanted poster?” Kaya asks with a giggle.

I groan. “I don’t want to think about that. You shoot one rat and you’re suddenly a criminal, bah!”

The President’s smile gets bigger. “I saw your Captain’s too, and Usopp! You’re in both!” she says excitedly.

Usopp gets a proud smirk on his face. “Yep! I’m proud to say I’m two times as famous now. It’s of course nothing compared to the bounty I amassed while in disguise on a foreign continent—”

I cut him off by smacking a hand over his mouth. “Keep the tall tales for later. I’ve still gotta force prince charming into talking with his dad, and Nami’s calling home tonight. I’ll leave you two to your catching up in a second, but Kaya! How’s your doctor training going?”

The President's mouth drops into an O. “How’d you know about that?” she asks. I blink.

Oh right, she didn’t tell us that.

“Lucky guess. So?”

The smile returns, bright and full of cheer. “It’s been amazing! My health has improved by leaps and bounds since I’ve started travelling to the bigger city to study. Maybe some change of scenery was all I needed!” she laughs.

I flash a big smile. “That’s great! You’ll be one of the best, I’m sure. When we eventually get our ship’s doctor I’ll make sure you two meet.”

The snail blinks. “Oh that would be wonderful!”

I snort. “Cool. I’ll leave you lovebirds to it then.”

Both Usopp and the snail turn bright red as I cackle my way up stairs and out the hatch.

Chapter End Notes

Smoker, listening in on the call: Did they just call me hot?
Tashigi, also listening in: Yes. Yes they did.

I'm very exited for Little Garden. This chapter is light on plot, but heavy on the family dynamic so it evens out.

AGAIN I REALLY LIKE VIVI BUT UUUUUUH — SHIT HAPPENS FOR PLOT REASONS, AIGHT?!

Chapter 25: Chapter Twenty Five: Ever Since You Came I'm Living Ultralife

Chapter Summary

Ultralife - Oh Wonder

Luffy just keeps giggling. "You told me to take you with me when I do fun stuff, so I'm taking you with me!"

Chapter Notes

This was originally named after a Smiths song until I realized it fit much better with something much later, so it's not anymore. Also outing myself as a Smiths enjoyer. I'm very sorry for this. There was almost three chapters in this saga titled after Smiths songs. So for that I'm even more sorry.

Something special about me is the fact that I can be the most lucky person on earth and not get my face burned at a beach, but still manage to burn the bottoms of my feet. Pro tip: DO NOT USE SUNSCREEN THAT EXPIRED IN 2010!!!! (I did use unexpired sunscreen after I found out I promise, I was only *unexposed* for like an hour lmao)

This is just reminder I'm kind of an idiot <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Aw, no snow. Too bad," Luffy complains.

Zoro raises an eyebrow at him. "Snow? In this climate?"

Luffy rolls across the railing, kicking his feet. "I mean, yeah. It already did once. You missed it 'cause you were sleeping, and Ed missed it because they were hiding."

I shoot him a glare from where I'm sitting on the floor doing a crossword from the paper. "I wasn't *hiding.* Nautical, second letter A, 6 letters."

Zoro thinks for a second. “Marine.”

I scratch it in with a scowl. “Of course. Stupid Navy funded newspaper crossword…”

“Do you think it’ll snow again?” Luffy directs at Vivi.

I tune out her long explanation because Sanji rolls out with a tray of bright mint green drinks. “Anyone want a special drink?” he announces.

“Woohoo!” Luffy, Zoro, Karoo, Usopp and I all shout, jumping the railing to grab one.

“Say, Usopp, can you make fishing gear?” Luffy asks around the straw in his mouth.

“Yeah sure,” Usopp responds.

“Fishing ain’t a bad idea,” Zoro nods, taking a sip of his drink. I note with no small amount of glee that it matches his hair.

“I will not be participating in fishing,” I state, taking a long refreshing sip of my own drink.

“Eh? Why not?” Luffy whines.

I shake my head. “Nope. Went fishing with my dad once and I managed to stab a hook through my finger and fall overboard. Not happening.”

“Hey look, a dolphin!” Sanji suddenly announces. We all turn just in time to witness a dolphin the size of a fucking island jump out of the water in a huge arc right over us.

“IT’S HUGE!” everyone screams.

“I fucking hate dolphins!” I scream, shaking my head like a wet dog as we’re sprayed with water.

“Why?” Zoro asks incredulously.

“They suck! Worst sea creature ever! Whale sharks are better!” I holler as we all start running to get the ship ready to ride the wake. I push Zoro out of the way as he runs into the galley to move the rudder. “You’re not allowed to steer!” I yell at him. He loudly groans and runs the other direction to secure some rigging.

As the second wave hits us we go surging across the water. “Hard to port!” Nami calls from outside. I jam myself against the rudder in ordinance with her instructions. “That’s definitely it, our next stop!” she announces.

I make my way back out to the bow of the ship as we watch Little Garden come into view. The island is shrouded in mist, with high mountains and multiple volcanos.

“Our second island in the Grand Line!” Luffy awes.

“We should be careful, I’m still worried about Miss All-Sunday’s warning,” Vivi states as we sail into a river that goes inland.

“Y — you don’t think there are monsters, so you?” Usopp whimpers.

I slap Zoro on the chest. “5,000 berri says there’s something batshit like dinosaurs on the island.”

He rolls his eyes heavenward. “The Grand Line is weird, but not that weird. You’re on.”

This motherfucking will never learn.

“We also have to stock up on food, since we didn’t get any on the last island,” Sanji mentions.

“I don’t know, Usopp might be right on this one. Just look at the plants here, I’ve never even seen this stuff in books,” Nami says, staring into the jungle with trepidation.

“Yeah… I’m not super thrilled about us trying to eat any of the megafauna or flora in this place,” I add, squinting at a pair of glowing eyes in the dense foliage.

There's a loud and shrill squawk from above us that sends both Usopp and Nami squealing. “How cute!” Sanji fawns.

Usopp peeks over his shoulder with a wink. “You mean me?”

Sanji’s face drops into a glare. “I obviously meant Nami!”

“What the fuck was that?!” Nami yells.

“Just a bird, perfectly harmless just like this jungle.” Sanji says with a smile, while a giant prehistoric bird swoops in behind him. Nami and Usopp scream and hit the deck while I tackle Sanji out of the way. “What the hell’s the matter with you, you damn bird?!” he screams up at the retreating creature. Then he turns to me, still on top of him, with a gooey smile. “Thank you for saving me, Ed!” he croons.

I give an unattractive snort and rise back to my feet, offering him a hand. “Yeah, anytime pretty boy.”

He practically melts, grabbing my hand and leaning on my legs. “You called me *preeettyyy!”* he cries, rubbing his face on my pants.

I gently kick him off. “Ok, calm down now.”

There’s a sudden loud crash that rumbles around us. “Does that *sound* like a harmless jungle?!” Nami cries.

“That sounded like a volcano erupting! We’re all gonna die!” Usopp shrieks.

Deep growls come from the jungle adjacent to us, and a giant tiger who’s glowing eyes I had spotted earlier stalks out. The tiger immediately collapses to the ground spewing blood from its mouth.

“This is definitely not normal! Why would a giant tiger just keel over covered in its own blood?!” Nami screams, grabbing at her hair.

“Log Pose and food be damned, we’re staying off that damn island!” Usopp declares, sweat pouring off his body in sheets.

“We can just quietly wait on the ship for the Log Pose to reset! When it’s done we leave *immediately!”* Nami demands as we come to a stop and Zoro drops the anchor over the side of the ship.

I’m relieved at least these two have some common sense. Not that it’ll matter.

Luffy starts giggling. “Sanji! Prepare two lunchboxes!”

Sanji gives him a weird look. “Huh? Lunchboxes?”

I also look at him strangely. “Two?”

Luffy grins and nods his head. “Yeah, pirate lunches! Me and Ed are going on an adventure!”

…Wait.

“I’m sorry, why am I coming with you?” I gape.

Luffy just keeps giggling. “You told me to take you with me when I do fun stuff, so I’m taking you with me!”

Does he mean what I said back in goddamn Shell Town? He has a habit of latching onto the weirdest things…

“W — wait just a second! Where the hell do you think you’re going?!” Nami yells, jumping in between him and Sanji.

“Adventure, fun stuff, wanna come along?” Luffy replies with a laugh, wiggling his arms like a lunatic. Nami’s face crumples as she realizes it's futile to argue with him. “Sanji! Lunch!” Luffy chants.

Sanji sighs and turns to head into the galley. “Alright, hang on a moment.”

Luffy cheers and swings one of his arms over my shoulders. He starts doing a stupid little jig, still wiggling his free arm.

“Say, could I come with you?” Vivi asks with a smile.

“Sure, sounds great!” Luffy says, spinning me in a circle and jumping back and forth.

“Ah ah ah!” I tut, wagging a finger at her. “Only if you show me how to use that cannon I — uh… repossessed from you!”

She raises an eyebrow. “You kept that?”

I squint at her. “...Yes. And you can’t have it back!”

She narrows her eyes but shakes her head. “That’s fine. I wasn’t very fond of it anyways.”

I give her a thumbs up. “Then you can come!”

“Wait what?! NO!” Nami squawks.

The smile returns to Vivi’s face. “Yeah… just sitting around here would do nothing but make me worry. So I may as well keep myself busy!”

Nami violently shakes her head. “No way! It’s way too dangerous for you out there!” she shrieks.

Vivi giggles. “I’ll be fine, I’ll have Karoo with me!” The duck in question drops his beak open to the ground in shock.

“Your trusty bodyguard looks too scared to even quack,” Nami says with a grimace.

Sanji pokes his head out the galley. “I’ll pack you a lunch as well, Vivi!” he calls.

She smiles brightly up at him. “Thank you! While you’re at it, could you get something for Karoo?”

“But of course, just leave it to me!” he laughs, going back inside.

“Oh wait!” I suddenly jolt out from under Luffy’s arm to fish something out of my pockets. I brandish two of the cans of bug spray I picked up in Loguetown. “Prehistoric island’s got evil bugs with prehistoric illnesses. Gotta stay safe!” I declare, shaking my cans.

I hose down Luffy Vivi Zoro and Usopp, then absolutely drench Nami. “Hey! What’s the big idea?” she grouches, waving in front of her face.

“Just a precaution!” I sing, tossing her the other can.

I toss a can each to Zoro, Usopp, and spray down Sanji and hand him another as he exits the galley with a backpack full of three lunches. Nami gives the can I threw her an experimental shake, then sprays me down as well. I blink at her.

“You forgot to get yourself,” she says with a wink, pressing the can back into my hands. “And I’m staying right here on this ship, so I won’t be needing this.” I give her a grimace and a pointed look around the ship then to the jungle. She glares at me while Sanji situates the backpack on Luffy’s back, then points to the jungle. “Get the fuck off.”

I snicker and trot over to the rail as Luffy jumps off. I throw myself over and yell, “catch me or I’ll cry!” down at him.

“Huh — ACK!”

He actually does catch me. On his head. When I fall on top of him. Thank god his stupid ass is made of rubber or that would have hurt like a bitch. Vivi hops down on Karoo’s back beside us.

“...What are you two doing?” she asks, her face oddly looking like she’s watching the live birthing of a calf. I mean, whatever the hell it is that me and Luffy are doing to try and detangle ourselves might be pretty close.

Once we’re up and Luffy’s backpack is back to being secure, he starts bounding off into the jungle. “Alright, let's go!” he hollers. I heave a long groan and take off after him, Vivi and Karoo right behind me.

_____

I force Luffy to slow down to a brisk speed walk after the first ten minutes because my ass is still not a distance runner, and as a gay person, speed walking is my specialty.

We find weird shit all throughout the jungle, a strange bug Luffy tries to stick in his mouth, a strange plant Luffy tries to stick in his mouth, and a strange fruit off a tree he actually succeeds in sticking in his mouth.

It's bigger than his head, so I have to smack him on the back to dislodge it from his throat. He spits the massive things out on the ground, and for a second I think he’s torn his throat open because thick red spills out of his mouth.

“Oh my god are you ok?!” Vivi shrieks.

Luffy wipes it off his chin and stares at it. I poke at the fruit. “He’s fine, the juice inside this thing just looks like blood.” I turn to my Captain with a glare. “Don’t stick any more shit in your mouth.” He gives me a begrudging nod.

After that, it doesn’t take very long for our journey to intercept a wide river. It’s slow moving and seemingly shallow around the banks, but still an obstacle for my hammer of a Captain.

Speaking of which, I can see him searching the opposite bank for something to grab onto to swing us over. I shut that down immediately.

"I am *not* flying air mail across this fucking thing. Just get on my back, I'll swim us across," I state, crouching down for him to climb on.

"Okay!" Luffy says, hopping onto my back and forcing an "oof!" from my mouth.

"Are you sure? Karoo could give all of us a ride over if you want to save your energy…" Vivi says hesitantly.

I wave her off as I start wading into the cold water. "Don't bother. If it suddenly drops off at some point I'd hate to drown your duck pal with a load bigger than he can handle."

I glance over my shoulder just in time to catch the pinched expression she's sending me before it smooths out and her and Karoo are following me into the river.

I'm able to comfortably trot across the thigh deep water for a good ten feet before I abruptly step into open water. "Woah! See, I was right. It gets really deep here, be careful," I call back to Vivi before plunging in.

Luffy goes boneless on my back as we submerge neck high. I can hear the splashes from Karoo behind me and I paddle across. Thank fucking god I'm as strong a swimmer as I am, or this would be such a pain.

"And I'm proud to be a swimerican, where at least I know I'm free~" I quietly sing to myself. Luffy giggles sluggishly from my back. In no time at all I'm back to trudging through muddy banks and gently depositing my soggy Captain on the ground.

He shakes his hair out like a wet dog then springs back up with renewed energy. "Yosh! Let's go!"

“Wait a second!” I stop him. I pull out one of my cans of bug spray and spray him again. “I’m not taking chances, that little dip of ours probably washed all this shit offa you.”

He scrunches his nose. “But it smells weird,” he complains.

I flatten my face. “Deal with it, Elastigirl.”

Vivi and Karoo finally make it up to the bank and Vivi hops down. “Would you mind if I borrowed that?” she asks, hand out for the spray.

I shrug and toss her the can. She shakes it a little then starts spraying down the duck. “I’d hate for Karoo to get sick,” she mumbles when she’s satisfied with her work.

She goes to hand me back the can but I shake my head. “You hang onto it.”

Vivi blinks at me in surprise before retracting her hand. “Alright,” she says quietly. Karoo nudges his beak into the can and points it back at her. Her eyes widen in understanding.

I turn back to Luffy where he’s crouched at the bank looking at something in the water. There's more sounds of the can going off behind me and a soft murmur of, “almost forgot myself…” that I ignore in favour of the thing Luffy’s fished out of the water.

“Check it out! It’s a clam that looks like a squid! A clam-squid!” he exclaims, holding the poor creature up by the shell.

“It kinda looks like an ammonite…” Vivi gasps, coming up for a closer look.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “So you know all about prehistoric marine life, do you?”

Her lip juts out and her face goes pink. “So what?” she mutters under her breath. Luffy starts shaking the creature while its tentacle things start wriggling.

“Luf don’t do that, you’ll rattle it’s poor brain,” I tut, snatching the creature from his hands. “I used to collect fossils of these shits. This is *so cool!”* I gush, placing it back in the water. It’s at that point we hear some crashing and interesting noises above and behind us.

The Jurassic Park theme starts playing in my head at top volume as we gaze up at the fucking dinosaur behind us. “Oh. Ok,” I deadpan. Vivi makes a strangled yelp beside me.

“What’s a Sea King doing on land?” Luffy asks.

“It’s a goddamn Brontosaurus! We in the fucking late Jurassic period!” I yell, laughing like a maniac. I can hear Vivi start to mutter under her breath about something or other.

Between one blink and the next, Luffy’s crazy ass is slingshotting himself up and on top of the dinosaur. “Luffy!” Vivi yells from beside me.

I whistle appreciatively up at the huge creature. “Wowie. That thing is *tall.”*

“Are you insane?! Ed, stop him!” Vivi screeches.

I cringe away from her, hands smacking down on my ears. “Good god, calm down. Worst thing that could happen is him getting eaten.”

Her eyes bug out and her face gets angrier. *“THAT WOULD BE TERRIBLE!”*

“There’s some weird holey rocks! Let's go check it out!” Luffy hollers from far above us.

I give him a thumbs up he probably can't see. "Sure thing, Captain!" Vivi muffles her screeches into her hands. Then the dinosaur tosses his head back, throwing Luffy into the air, and swallows him in one gulp. Vivi immediately starts screaming. I stare on in exhausted incredulity. "Ah. Shit."

There's a loud whistle as the air splits and the dinosaur's head is sliced clean off. Rising high behind the collapsing body of the dinosaur is the hulking form of Dorry.

He has a huge grinning smile through an incredibly long beard. A giant sword is held in one hand and a shield is strapped to the other. He has a huge billowing cape on his shoulders, and a morion-esque helmet with viking style face gear that sits atop his head.

As Luffy falls out of the dinosaur's decapitated head, he lands in the palm of Dorry's shield adorned hand. He bellows out his signature laugh. "Gegyagya! Aren't you a lively one! I haven't had any guests in a long time!"

I sock a frozen Vivi on the shoulder. "See? Just fine! Jesus, this guy is huge!" I laugh. "Luf! Introduce us to your new friend!" I holler up. Vivi looks at me in unabashed horror. Luffy peeks down at us over the side of Dorry's massive hand.

Dorry himself laughs again. "I'm Elbaf's strongest warrior, Dorry! Let me invite you folks to my place!"

_____

Dorry carries us (and may I just, getting carried in the hand of a giant is so fucking awesome what has my life become—) back to his home at one of the huge 'holey rocks' Luffy had seen earlier.

He sets us up with a couple huge chunks of meat he cooked up from the Brontosaurus he murdered in exchange for me and Luffy's lunches. Luffy has chewed out a small crater in the meat that he and I are sitting in.

“This is really good, Mr. Giant!” Luffy cheers, cheeks stuffed with food.

I give him a wide grin and two thumbs up. “Excellent cooking, Mr. Dorry!”

A laugh explodes out from his chest. “Gegyagya! And your little pirate lunch boxes are pretty good too! Though they are a little small!”

“You bet it is! I would have kicked your ass if you said it tasted bad!” Luffy cackles.

Dorry wheezes, slapping his leg. “Aren’t you a funny one!”

I gnaw on a fistful of meat. “Humour is our crew's specialty.”

“So why’re ya living here alone anyways? Do you not have a village or something?” Luffy asks through full cheeks.

“I do. It's called Elbaf, a village for warriors. It’s out on the Grand Line.” He leans his giant head down toward us. “But my village has a certain rule.”

Luffy hums. “Rule?”

Dorry nods. “If a fight breaks out in my village and you can’t settle it on your own, then we beseech our God Elbaf for his judgement. Whoever he decides is righteous he gives victory and divine protection. I’ve gotten into a quarrel myself, so this island serves as the battleground of me and another giant. The one in the right shall survive and triumph.” Dorry’s face splits into a wide smile and he throws his head back. “But it’s been one hundred years since! We just can’t seem to settle our duel! Gegyagya!” he laughs.

Luffy learns forward. “You’ve been fighting for over a hundred years?!” he awes.

Dorry grins down at us. “It’s nothing to be surprised about, a giant's lifespan is three times you humans. Gegyagya!”

I snort. “Dude, that’s still a third of your life! Just do rock paper scissors or some shit!”

He laughs again. “I don’t know what that is!”

“Even if your lives are longer, how could you still want to fight after a hundred years?! At this point is there any reason to keep fighting?!” Vivi yells from the ground. “You’re trying to kill each other—”

Vivi’s rant is cut short by the volcano in the middle of the island erupting. “Whoa! That’s some explosion!” Luffy awes, both him and I sliding to the ground.

Dorry rises from his seat. “Looks like it’s time to get going…” he mumbles. “Not sure when exactly we decided it, but the eruption of that volcano is the signal for battle,” he explains, cracking his knuckles.

“What?! You can’t possibly hate each other so much you’d want to keep killing each other for this long!” Vivi yells again. “Just what could have made you this mad—”

Luffy cuts her off by slapping a hand over her mouth. “Stop. It’s not about that anymore,” he announces, staring up at Dorry with a glow to his eyes.

Dorry faces forward with a determined smile, sword at the ready. “Yes. It’s about pride now.” Dorry launches forward, we almost lose sight of him over the top of the trees. A resounding clang sends a shockwave through the island. “We forgot the reason ages ago!”

Luffy is staring up with awe clear on his face. He flops on his back onto the ground. “I’m beat. They’re just sooo huge!”

I train my eyes on the fight. “You can say that again.”

Chapter End Notes

E. D. “Refuses to button up their shirt out of spite no matter the situation” Domino, being confronted by the Little Garden jungle: Ahhhh. Ah fuuuuck.

Let’s talk about how banger the end song for Little Garden is. Please. It’s so good.

Y'all ready for some shenanigans, skullduggery, and good ol' fashion fisticuffs?

Chapter 26: Chapter Twenty Six: I Keep Coming Up Short

Chapter Summary

Amsterdam - Imagine Dragons

Dorry frowns down at me. “Tampered with, eh? That’s too bad, I’ve missed rum.” He picks up the two barrels and juggles them in his hand for a second before tossing them off into the woods. They disappear through the canopy, then there’s a bang and a plume of smoke goes up from that direction.

Chapter Notes

This song unironically changed my brain chemistry. Imagine Dragons music is peak and I’m tired of pretending it’s not. Honest to god a top five song for me.

Y’all exited for the Gear 5 episode? I’m more exited about it than my birthday. The two events are separated by a matter of hours. Living *well.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dorry and Brogy’s duel ends with a tie. Again. It’s short, brutal, and ends with shields to their faces. The loud laughter of the two giants echoes through the forest. Then Dorry, beat up and bruised, comes lumbering back to the clearing we’re sat in.

He drops to the ground with a couple barrels in hand, big smile slapped on his face. “It seems Brogy has a couple guests of his own!”

“A long nosed fella and an orange haired gal?” I guess.

He lets out a hearty laugh. “Gegyagya, yup!”

Luffy crosses his legs and starts tilting back and forth beside me. “Must be Nami and Usopp! They said they weren’t even gonna get off the ship! Maybe they really *do* like adventures…”

“Sorry to change the subject, but does it really take a whole year for the Log to reset on this island?” Vivi asks, worry soaking her tone.

Dorry nods. “Haven't you noticed all the little human skeletons lying around? Most of those who come to this island end up dying before their Log resets.” He counts off his giant fingers on one hand. “Eaten by dinosaurs, dying of heat or exhaustion, some hunger, or trying to attack us. Whatever the case, they all end up dying on this island. Seems like a single year is just too long for you little humans to survive here.”

Vivi smashes her face into her hands. “What do I do… Even if I survive on this island until then, who knows what will become of my country…” she cries.

“Nah dude, I’ll get eaten in less than a month if we stay that long,” I say with a grimace.

Luffy groans. “Yeah, and spending a whole year here would get kinda boring. Isn’t there some other way, mister?”

Dorry shakes his head. “The only Eternal Pose I’ve got leads to Elbaf. In a way it’s what me and Brogy have been fighting for this whole time.” He somehow gets across that he’s wiggling his eyebrows from under his helmet. “You wanna try taking it by force?”

Luffy throws his head back with another groan. “That’s no good. We’re not trying to get to Elbaf, just the next island. Right?”

Vivi tilts her head to the ground. “Yes. If we veer off our current course to Alabasta, there’s no point…”

“Maybe you should just sail forward randomly, if you’re lucky you’ll get there! Gegyagya!” Dorry suggests, slapping his giant knee.

Luffy burst out laughing. “Shishishi! I think that just might work!”

I can’t hold back a snort as they both start laughing louder. It dissolves into full blown cackles from all three of us as Vivi shoots us disappointed looks.

“Gegyagya! Well either way, we found these barrels of rum out in the woods to enjoy!” Dorry announces, cracking one of the barrels he brought over open.

I frown up at them. “Wait! Wait, can I see one of those real quick?”

He shrugs a massive shoulder and lowers the barrel to the ground. Peeking inside, everything looks fine right up until I notice these small pellets of… something near the bottom of the barrel.

“Hey, this looks tampered with. Usopp found some of the same shit in a barrel of alcohol we had for cleaning on our ship. Sorry Mr. Dorry, we’re being chased by some real underhanded fuckers. You might be getting caught in the crossfire,” I call up.

Dorry frowns down at me. “Tampered with, eh? That’s too bad, I’ve missed rum.” He picks up the two barrels and juggles them in his hand for a second before tossing them off into the woods. They disappear through the canopy, then there’s a bang and a plume of smoke goes up from that direction.

We all stare for a second.

“Geez. Glad that didn’t happen in my stomach!” Dorry laughs.

I grimace. “No kidding.”

Vivi is still staring off at the column of smoke. “Does that mean Baroque Works is already on the island?” she asks, horror filling her tone.

“Not only that, it's probably Mr. 5’s team *and* Mr. 3’s team. That’s four officer agents out here trying to kick our asses,” I state, taking a quick glance at the surrounding woods. Nothing jumps out at me as suspicious, so I turn back around.

“What a bunch of jerks!” Luffy huffs.

Dorry throws his head back and starts laughing. “Gegyagya! I sure appreciate the concern, but whatever small fries are chasing you don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of taking down me—”

Something shoots past my head, Vivi’s hair swinging forward from the sheer force and speed of it. Dorry makes a strange choking sound, then looks down at us with wide eyes. He scrambles back a few paces and opens his mouth again.

“You better ru—”

A crack like thunder sounds, muffled but still incredibly loud. Dorry’s eyes roll back as smoke and flames explode out of his mouth. He collapses to the ground with a tremendous bang.

“MR. DORRY!”

“GIANT GUY!”

“HOLY SHIT!”

Luffy and Vivi run forward to check on the giant. I whip around to the jungle I had just scanned. There’s still nothing. “Those Baroque sons of bitches! Where the fuck are they!” I roar, stalking toward the treeline with my pistol drawn.

There's loud hacking and the wet splash of blood on the ground behind me. "Mr. Dorry please take it easy!" Vivi cries. I turn back around to see Dorry slam his sword into the ground to leverage himself up.

"What — *hack* an underhanded *cough* trick!" Dorry gargles. Blood is slipping between his teeth and staining his beard. His hand slips off the handle and he faceplants on the ground.

"OH MY GOD THE OLD GIANT GUY DIED!" Luffy screams, eyes bugging out of his face.

"No! He's fine, I think he just passed out from his injuries!" Vivi sighs, a hand coming up to run through her hair.

"Shit shit *shit!* How the hell did they manage that even without the fucked up rum?!" I mutter under my breath, pacing back and forth still staring at the trees.

"It seemed like some kind of projectile," Vivi states.

I shoot her a glare over my shoulder. "No shit! *From where?!"* She looks taken aback by my aggression, but I just keep pacing and bring my hands up to tug on my hair.

Fuck fuck fuck! I could have avoided the whole wax cake affair with that!

"Ed, you think—" Luffy is cut off by the central volcano suddenly going off. All three of us curse at varying volumes. Dorry stirs from where he's on the ground, fists slamming into the ground and pushing himself upright. "Wait, giant guy! Don't go!" Luffy yells.

"Mr. Dorry, you have to rest! You'll die if you push yourself too hard!" Vivi cries.

"Yeah dude, you gotta sit this one out!" I call frantically.

“I am the warrior Dorry… I will fight for Elbaf’s honour and to uphold my pride as a warrior!” he grits out. We stare up at him in shock. Dorry rises to his feet, heaving heavy breaths and leaning heavily on his sword.

“Hey, maybe sometimes pride is admitting that you aren't doing so hot?!” I shout, shaking Luffy by the shirt as Dorry takes a couple staggering steps away from us.

He turns to the giant ‘holey rock’ and grabs onto it firmly. He lets out loud grunts as he lifts the massive thing and turns back to us. “He picked up that huge rock! That’s so cool!” Luffy awes.

Vivi slowly backs up. “Luffy…” she starts trepidatiously.

Luffy’s eyes widen as the rock drops toward us. He slams his palm into my chest and I go flying backwards, smacking into Vivi with a shriek as I tumble to the ground.

“What’re you doing?! Are you nuts?! Take this thing offa me!” Luffy hollers. As the dust clears we can see him half stuck under the massive structure.

“I can’t stop,” Dorry announces. “It’s been over a century… since we started this duel… injured or not, you can’t run from a battle you’ve started…” Dorry heaves a couple more breaths, turning in the direction of the volcano. “It would be like running from the title of warrior. If I were no longer a warrior… I would no longer be me,” he declares. Then he glances at us over his shoulder. “Whether these people were after you or not, this is a judgement from Elbaf, God of war. I didn’t have my God's protection, nothing more.”

His loud stomping steps echo through the clearing as he makes his way away from us.

“Gods and divine protection have nothing to do with this! If a god told you to die, would you?! Someone has interfered with your duel!” Luffy screams, fists clenched on the ground. Dorry pauses in his steps. “And a duel that has been interfered with isn’t a fair fight anymore! Isn’t that right?!”

“Silence!” Dorry shouts. “What could you know of this? You’ve only lived for 10 or 20 years, you couldn’t possibly understand the ways of the warriors of Elbaf!” Then he continues to walk.

Luffy starts slamming his hands into the rock. “Who cares about that?! Get this damn thing off me! Hey! Old guy! Come back!” Luffy hollers. Dorry doesn’t look back again. Luffy continues slamming his fists into the ground with wordless yells, his slamming gets so vigorous his hat goes flying off. “Damnit! Of course as soon as I meet a great warrior *this* happens!” I start pacing again and checking my pistol to confirm it’s fully loaded. “Who did this?! I’ll kill them!” Luffy grits into the ground.

I start grumbling under my breath and glaring into the jungle. I almost think I see something shift. Isn’t Usopp on his way?

“I’d say we have less than five minutes before everything goes tits up,” I state.

“This isn’t already tits up?” Vivi asks incredulously.

There’s a sudden and familiar high pitched scream that echoes from the forest, then Usopp is hurtling through the underbrush and slamming face-first into a rock.

I sigh. “…Make that one minute.”

“WE ARE IN BIG TROUBLE! NAMI WAS EATEN BY A DINOSAUR!” Usopp, face scuffed and nose slightly crooked, screams.

Luffy’s jaw drops open. “Seriously?!”

I smack my hands into my cheeks. “Goddamnit!”

“We were running through the jungle, and suddenly she’s gone! What am I gonna do?! I let my friend die!” Usopp wails while Luffy starts screaming and I groan into my hands.

“Wait a minute, calm down! You said she disappeared, you can’t be *sure* she was eaten!” Vivi reasons.

“Well it’s not like I could stop and check! If it wasn’t a dinosaur, it was some other kind of beast!” Usopp hollers in her face.

“I don’t know for sure, but if Baroque Works really is on the island, it’s possible they kidnapped Nami,” Vivi explains.

“Baroque Works is on the island?! Why would they only catch Nami and not me?!” Usopp shrieks.

“You aren’t on their hit list yet. Zoro, Vivi, Luffy, and Nami are all targets because of what happened on Whiskey Peak,” I state, still staring at the treeline.

“With the rum situation, it really is the most likely scenario,” Vivi agrees, looking around the clearing with worry plain on her face.

“Rum?” Usopp questions.

While Vivi starts explaining the situation to Usopp and he starts freaking out, I start to inch toward the jungle. That hint of movement I saw earlier, which I initially had assumed was an approaching Usopp, came from an entirely different direction than where Usopp came barrelling out.

I squint into the underbrush. Then there's a tremendous crash and I turn just in time to see a literal fountain of blood spray up in the distance. “No…” I mumble with dawning horror.

Luffy starts smashing his head into the ground and screaming. “WHO WAS IT?! WHO DID THIS?!” he screams.

“Start digging yourself out like a dog,” I suggest. Luffy gives me a determined nod and starts doing just that.

“Don’t worry Luffy, I’ll find them!” Usopp announces with shaking knees.

“No need,” comes an arrogant voice behind us. I whip back around. Standing at the edge of the clearing where I had seen the *damn* movement is Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine, a beat up Karoo slung over Mr. 5’s shoulder.

“It’s you!” Luffy growls.

Mr. 5 tosses Karoo across the clearing. “You can have this back. We don’t need him,” 5 states.

Vivi dashes forward and skids across the ground to her duck, hands hovering over him worriedly. “Why did you do this?! Karoo never did anything to you!” she shouts.

Mr. 5 stares at us impassively. “You’re right. That bird had nothing to do with this. But… We needed to get our hands on your Strawhat man.” He gives us a wry smile, more akin to a grimace if anything. “All your bird had to do was squawk and lure you three out here, but he really pissed me off,” he continues as Vivi’s face drops, fury taking over her features. “Seems that boy can’t move anymore though, so we no longer have need of him.”

Miss Valentine starts laughing her irritating ass laugh.

“I’ll kill you…” Vivi grits out.

“Are you the ones who put a bomb in the rum?!” Usopp shouts.

Mr. 5 snrks. “Yeah, that was us.”

I growl under my breath. “Ok enough of this shit. You here to dance? Lets fucking dance,” I grunt, pointing my pistol at the newcomers.

The pair stare at me unperturbed. “That one on the list?” 5 asks.

“Nope, but we should probably kill them anyway,” Valentine replies.

“Try it,” I say, steadying my hand and firing.

Six bullets left.

Valentine floats up into the air with her umbrella open, and 5 leans to the side. The bullet lands somewhere among the trees. Usopp saddles up next to me, slingshot raised at 5 while Vivi pulls out her Peacock Slashers.

Vivi charges at a descending Valentine, while Usopp shoots an explosive at 5. Through the smoke a black pellet comes rocketing at us. I send a prayer to a god I don’t believe in and shoot again. The pellet explodes midair and I can feel the wave of heat wash across my face.

Five bullets. I can’t belive I fucking hit that oh my god—

Vivi lets out a cry as she comes skidding past me and Usopp, apparently kicked by Valentine. Usopp charges past me at 5, and gets blown up for his troubles. Valentine jumps into the air and descends on him at high speeds, planting him in the ground like a carrot.

As the dust clears 5 comes lunging forward at me. I shoot again and miss, it flies wide past his head.

Four bullets left.

It's nothing but muscle memory from play fighting with my sister as a kid that sends my leg kicking up into his outstretched hand.

The bomb he was shooting careens off into some other part of the clearing. He grunts and lashes out with his other hand, fist planting itself firmly in my face. My head snaps back, eyes involuntarily watering as my feet fly out from under me.

There's another shout from Vivi, then what sounds like choking. When I dazedly blink my eyes back open I can see Vivi held by her neck by 5, and a rapidly falling and laughing Valentine gunning right for my head.

My eyes widen. "ED MOVE!" Luffy screams. I roll to my left and my back is showered in flying rock fragments as she slams into the ground where I was. I shove my pistol back in its holster and scream, scrambling backwards while coughing out dust.

A foot slams onto my back and sends me sprawling on my sore face. "Calm down. We're not going to kill you just yet," Mr. 5 chuckles. "We're just here to abduct you. Those were Mr. 3's orders."

I crane my neck back to glare at him. "Fuck you and your candle loving buddy," I snarl.

Valentine strides up to stand over me. She hums. "You know, I think I recognize this one from a new bounty poster. 10,000,000 berri if I remember correctly."

I snap my teeth at her.

5 chuckles behind me. "That so? Guess we'll take this one with us as well."

Valentine jams a foot into my stomach that has me wheezing onto the ground. She grabs me in a surprisingly strong grip and hauls me to my feet, holding my arms behind my back in a vice.

"You guys are gonna PAY FOR THIS!" Luffy screams, clawing at the ground.

Mr. 5 tosses Vivi onto the ground, where Miss Valentine plants a foot on top of her to keep her still. He stalks past us toward Luffy. My eyes widen and I start struggling and flailing in Valentine's grip.

"Don't touch him! Stay the fuck away from my Captain!" I shriek.

I'm ignored. Mr. 5 sets off an explosion in the face of Luffy while Miss Valentine laughs like a hyena behind me.

"Consider this payback for Whiskey Peak. You should learn to mind your own business, now we have your swordsman and that other girl," 5 sneers.

"You caught Zoro?" Luffy chokes out. "You're in more trouble than I thought."

Mr. 5 smirks down at him. "Oh? You still have energy to talk?"

Luffy wheezes a laugh into the dirt, "you guys *suck,"* and he spits on 5's shoe. I can't help the snort I let out. Valentine shoots me a glare I smirk at.

The smirk drops as Mr. 5 rears his leg back and plants an explosive kick in Luffy's face. "STOP! KNOCK IT OFF!" I howl, struggling against Valentine with renewed desperation. She holds fast, shrieking her hideous laugh all the while.

Explosion after explosion rocks the clearing while I continue to scream bloody murder. I nearly scream myself hoarse before Mr. 5 is satisfied with his level of destruction. Luffy's

hand reaches out of the smoke before falling limp to the ground.

I slump in on myself, staring down at the ground and trying to blink tears out of my eyes. Mr. 5 strolls up and hauls Vivi over his shoulder and motions for Miss Valentine to follow him.

He's going to be fine, you know he's going to be fine. Calm down and figure a way out of this situation.

_____

The two of them drag us out of the clearing away from my charred companions. I let my feet drag just to annoy Valentine as we trek through the jungle. Strange noises come from every direction, and I swear something is following us.

An idea lights up in my mind.

I pay special attention for the next minute. I clock onto the fact that Valentine's grip loosens ever so slightly every time she climbs over an obstacle.

You messed with the wrong detective, fuckface.

The next time she steps up onto a log I rip my arms out of her hands.

"Are you kidding?" she groans, lunging for me. I drop to the ground and roll into the underbrush, then jump to my feet and take stock of my surroundings.

Lots and lots of trees, fucking fantastic. Hey wait, trees with a familiar looking fruit!

Checkmate, you sour bitch.

I can hear Valentine stomping forward, so I take off into the jungle. I snatch one of the huge fruits as I run, searching around frantically. I spot what was following us at that point. A giant Stegosaurus stares at me while I charge right towards it.

"OH MY GOD A DINOSAUR!" I scream, tossing the fruit at its face and sliding under it into a bush. I hear a snap as its jaw closes around the fruit. I try to quiet my breathing as much as humanly possible and pray once again to whatever god will listen.

"Shit! Our bounty got eating by a fucker dinosaur!" I can hear Valentine hiss.

"You let Ed get eaten?! ED!" Vivi shrieks. Aw man, I almost feel bad. Eh, she'll be fine.

"Nevermind them, we only actually need the princess," Mr. 5 declares.

Suckers.

Chapter End Notes

Ed, trying to avoid plot points and instead falling ass backwards into them: FUCK

Me writing an actual fight scene? Yeah bitch we in it now.

It has been a fucken bad week so I hope you guys are all having the most wonderful time. My cat keeps trying to sleep on top of my laptop when I'm writing so she says hi.

Chapter 27: Chapter Twenty Seven: Hit ‘Em Right Between The Eyes

Chapter Summary

> *You’re Gonna Go Far, Kid - The Offspring*
>
> The weight under me groans and I roll off it. Beside me is a little girl, eyes swirling and mouth agape, that I recognize as Miss Goldenweek. I wheeze into the ground, then roll back on top of the girl to restrain her.

Chapter Notes

> BRO COLLEGE SO MUCH MONEY. HOW FIX.
>
> Anyways my mother is an artist and I was actively encouraged to pursue art as a career my entire life 👍 I'm starting to think it was a ploy to keep me from becoming a lawyer. It was a good decision on her part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I stay still until I’m certain they’ve cleared out. I tentatively crawl out of my bush and look up at the Stegosaurus. Deep red fruit juice stains its lips as it chews. I flash it a bright smile and a thumbs up. “Thanks pal!” Then I take off away from it as fast as I can.

I tear through the trees in a random direction. “Fuck fuck fuck!” I mutter, swinging my head around violently. “Where the fuck am I?!” Everything in this god forsaken jungle looks the same!

I hear something like a yell in the distance and change my course for that. I crash through the jungle, twigs smacking me in the face and getting stuck in my hair. I can see the giant spinning structure of the pumpkin cake and a break in the trees ahead and a big smile spreads out across my face.

Then I trip.

A scream jumps out of my mouth as I go rolling into the clearing. I somersault my way halfway across the place before I smack into something. I roll a few more feet with the added weight then come to a stop.

The weight under me groans and I roll off it. Beside me is a little girl, eyes swirling and mouth agape, that I recognize as Miss Goldenweek. I wheeze into the ground, then roll back on top of the girl to restrain her.

“Hey guys! How’s it going!” I laugh breathlessly.

“ED!” come shouts from all my crewmates.

“I thought you died?!” Vivi yells.

“The rumours of my death were greatly exaggerated!” I groan back.

Vivi, Zoro, and Nami are all up on the cake covered in wax, with Zoro in a stupid pose and his ankles gushing blood. Luffy is standing on a black circle, and Usopp, Karoo and Mr. 5’s team are nowhere to be seen.

“Geez, I leave you guys alone for ten minutes and you get yourselves in so much trouble!” I reprimand.

“Nevermind that, fix him!” Nami screeches down at me. I turn to Luffy, who’s still standing on that black circle.

Ah, I remember this.

“Luf, don’t leave that circle!” I instruct.

All three of the cake toppers start shouting in outrage. “WHAT?!”

Luffy scrunches his face. “No!” he says petulantly, then takes a step outside the circle. His eyes light up and he whips his head around. “What happened? That was weird…” Luffy mutters, scratching his head.

“Luffy help us now!” Nami shrieks. Luffy nods his head, rearing up his arm. “Yeah alright!” Goldenweek starts squirming under me, and worms her arms out of my grasp.

“No — You little shit!” I screech. She flings her hands out and green paint goes spraying all over Luffy’s shirt. I try to stop it, but only succeed in getting it on my hand.

AH SHit…

Everything mellows out. I feel my eyelids droop and my grip go lax. My nerves seem to go offline in my arms and legs, like the strings of a puppet being unceremoniously cut. I don’t protest as Goldenweek shimmies out from under me, sitting down at her picnic blanket and pouring out cups of tea.

My mouth moves of its own accord. “Ah, this is delicious,” me and Luffy sigh in unison.

“ARE YOU CRAZY?!” yells out the cake toppers, but that doesn’t really matter.

I can feel weeks of built up tension forcefully leaking out of my shoulders. My jaw cries in relief as it's given a once in a blue moon break from unending clenching.

The entire world around me is irrelevant. I don’t care that all my cremates are turning into statues on top of a wax cake. I don’t care that they’re screaming for help. I can’t make myself care as Usopp comes zooming into the clearing on Karoo’s back.

“This is such good tea,” Luffy grits out, cup rattling in his hands.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TWO DOING?!” Usopp screams.

My hands are shaking, and sweat is pouring out of every single one of my pores. In fact, so much sweat is rolling off my body it's smearing the paint.

Everything suddenly clicks back into place. My spine snaps straight, I drop my tea. I lunge across the picnic blanket, tear Luffy’s shirt off him, and tackle Goldenweek. I wrap the shirt around her hands and she goes boneless.

“AAUGH! I HATE MAGIC PAINT!” I howl.

Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine come running into the clearing, chasing after Usopp and Karoo. Mr. 5 is brandishing a revolver and Miss Valentine looks pissed to the max.

“Stop running!” she shrieks, flying up into the air with her umbrella. Usopp is suddenly blown off Karoo by 5 firing an explosion with his gun, and I scramble to my feet beside Luffy.

“Are you two ok now?!” Usopp calls, voice hoarse.

“I am so sick of hypnotism!” Luffy grunts. “I refuse to let you hurt any more of my friends!”

I stick a hand up. “I am also very unhappy! And have a newfound fear of loss of control!”

Mr. 5 smirks at us. “What good is getting mad now? Your friends are already finished!”

“No! They’re still alive!” Luffy yells.

5 lets out a laugh. “A nice coat of pain and they’ll be perfect wax statues! It’s too late for you to do anything!”

I brandish my pistol, doing a fancy spin that I somehow manage to not drop it through, and point it at him. “You sure about that?”

Trees on the other side of the clearing start crashing down as a hulking robot suit made of wax comes rumbling towards us. “That’s right! It’s too late and you’re about to taste real disappointment!” Mr. 3 hollers.

“Ew. What is that?” I say with disgust.

“Excuse me?! My Candle Champion is my best piece of art!” 3 sputters.

I furrow my brow. “You call this art..?” I ask hesitantly. His face scrunches up. “...Don’t quit your day job buddy,” I say patronizingly.

His face turns bright red and the candle on his dumb suit starts spitting fire like mad. “EXCUSE YOU?! This is the very pinnacle of art! You couldn’t possibly have a single criticism!”

I turn my nose up at him, a smirk dripping with condescension plastered on my face.

Time to channel my mother and her disappointment in my choices.

“Bud, art isn't a real career. And uh, if it was this sure wouldn’t be the *pinnacle* of it. Ever heard of shape? Forms? A cohesive design? It’s obvious you had no focus or plan when designing it,” I sneer.

The fire starts burning brighter. *"PLAN?!* I'm a master of plans! This whole operation was my own flawless design!"

I send him another pitying look. "The plan that completely fell apart, you mean?"

"SHUT UP! SOMEONE SHUT THEM UP!" he shrieks, lunging towards Luffy. Valentine sighs and starts flying toward me poised for a kick. I lunge forward and roll under her leg, drawing my pistol and firing at her back.

Three bullets left.

The bullet just barely tears through her side, probably doing only superficial damage as she spins back around with a furious scowl. "You bitch!" she screeches, swinging at me with her umbrella.

I duck under it and fire a shot over at 5, who's aiming a shot at Usopp. His revolver flings out of his hand with a clang, and I roll out of the way of another swing. "Your art's ugly and you're a bad tactician!" I holler over at 3.

Oh my god that was so fucking COOL—

He makes an enraged scream as he keeps attacking Luffy. Valentine makes a kick aimed for my face that I lean out of the way of, and she uses the momentum to shoot herself into the air. I fire a shot at her I think misses because I'm partially blinded by the sun. Yeah that's why.

One bullet left.

I take the spare second it grants me to shove the single stick of gum I have from home (that has been living in my pocket since I got here) into my mouth, a plan forming in my head.

Valentine slams into the ground beside me as I leap out of her path, my last shot fired over my shoulder and tearing a hole in her umbrella. “YOU PIECE OF SHIT!” she howls, completely abandoning grace in her pursuit.

“Usopp!” I call around the chewing, in between dodging the attacks of an enraged Valentine.

“Yeah?” he calls back, apparently locked in a game of tag with Mr. 5.

“Get ready to lend me some firepower! Literally!” I holler, jumping over a kick aimed at my ankles.

You know, I’m surprisingly good at dodging attacks.

No sooner than I have that thought am I blindsided by a kick to the side that sends me sprawling across the grass. I wheeze into the dirt and pushing myself to my knees, glaring at the lemon lady.

As Valentine comes surging towards me I rip my extra can of bug spray from my pocket and jam my wad of gum into the spray mechanism. As It starts spraying I whip the thing into the air towards the cake.

“USOPP!” I scream, then get absolutely bodied by Valentine driving a kick into my stomach. I roll across the grass, and as bile jumps out of my mouth I see Usopp shoot out something that lights on fire halfway up.

As it connects with the can there's a bright explosion and a huge bang as fire rains down on the cake. A second can goes flying into the fire from Usopp’s direction, with another huge explosion engulfing the clearing in flames.

I whistle through my teeth. “Yikes. That had waaay more bang than I thought it would.”

“Curse you Strawhat! Curse all of you!” Mr. 3 cries, scrambling out of his melting suit. He goes running into the woods, snatching Miss Goldenweek on the way. Luffy takes off after him.

I’m distracted by whatever the hell is going on over there by Valentine cold clocking me across the chin. “I’m so sick of you people!” she screams, jumping into the air with a flip. “I’ll shatter you into fucking pieces!”

I look down at my empty gun, then stare up at her in horror. “Ah shit,” I mutter.

She comes rocketing down towards me and I scrunch my eyes closed. There’s an influx of feminine yelling, and I open my eyes to Nami and Vivi absolutely destroying Valentine as they come swooping out of the flames.

“That was hot! Couldn’t you have had a better idea?” Nami, shirtless, says with a smirk.

I throw her an exhausted thumbs up. “I’ll work on it!”

She throws her head back and laughs. “You better! Thank you anyways.”

“So the wax melted. We can’t afford to screw up this mission any further!” Mr. 5 growls, pointing his retrieved revolver at the group of us.

Usopp rolls into view and shoots his slingshot at the man. “Take this! Explosive bullet!”

“I already showed you explosives don’t work on me!” he laughs, gulping down the bullet.

Usopp smirks. “How about Tabasco?”

5’s face drops. He falls to the ground hacking as actual smoke starts spewing from his mouth. “That’s enough! I’ll take you down with me then!” he hoarsely screams, throwing himself toward us.

He’s stopped by a flaming meteor, or a demon, bursting out of the explosion's fire. Zoro slides across the ground in a flaming pinwheel of swords.

King of Hell indeed.

He comes to a stop, sheathing his swords and putting the fires on them out. “Flaming swords aren't too bad,” he smirks. I could cry in relief. A giant hand slams into the ground behind us. “You alive, then?” Zoro calls up.

“Yeah,” Brogy grunts. He stares down at Dorry’s unmoving body for a moment. “It seems two foes are left.”

I wave a hand. “Luffy’s got ‘em, anyone still got a can of bug spray?” A couple people start patting their pockets, but it’s Vivi who tosses one to me. She has an odd expression on that I don’t bother reading into.

I nod my thanks to her and start shaking it. It’s at that point Luffy comes jogging back into the clearing with Karoo.

Brogy takes that as his cue to start bawling at such an intense rate it puts out all the remaining fires in the area. We all slam our hands over our ears as his cries reach a pitch loud enough to rouse the dead. It actually does manage to rouse Dorry, so maybe it's the same thing. Everyone’s eyes bug out of their heads as he sits up.

“You’re alive?!” Brogy wails.

“Seems I passed out…” Dorry grunts, clutching his bleeding shoulder.

“How the hell are you still alive?” Nami asks incredulously.

“Must be the weapons…” Dorry mutters.

“Oh! Even weapons from Elbaf would be dull after a hundred years of use!” Usopp concludes.

As the giants start hugging and reuniting I start spraying down my compatriots, starting with the still shirtless Nami.

“Midriff exposed you fool!” I grumble, getting her very thoroughly. She rolls her eyes but lets me do as I please. I shrug off my flannel and drape it across her shoulders. “God Nami, what would Sanji think, with you running around the jungle half naked!” I say dramatically. She snorts, then socks me in the shoulder. “Ow! The fuck was that for?” I whine, passing the can to Zoro who sprays himself.

She glares at me. “That’s for making us think you were dead! Poor Vivi was distraught!”

I rub my arm with a frown. “But I didn’t die though! I consider this a complete and total win.”

“How did you survive? I thought you got eaten by a dinosaur!” Vivi exclaims.

I shrug. “Had to get those idiots off my back, so I did a little fake out. Didn’t mean to trick you too. My bad!” I say with a small smirk. I love when my plans work. She gets a small frown on her face.

“Gegyagya! We’ve been here so long I completely forgot about the bounties on our heads!” Dorry laughs.

Vivi's frown deepens. "But I'm the whole reason Baroque Works was here in the first place…" she mumbles.

Nami pinches her cheek. "None of that!"

"Yeah Vivi, don't be so down! Have a rice cracker!" Luffy says, cracker dust flying between his lips. I hold my hand out for one, and Usopp tosses his to me. As I'm chewing on it I start thinking.

Man, I'm glad Nami won't be getting sick this time. Having to navigate the way to Drum without her would suck.

Wait…

If Nami isn't sick… why would we… go to… Drum…

…FUCK!

I spit my rice cracker out. "FUCK!" A few heads turn to me so I slap on a smile and wave my hands. "Sorry, bit my cheek!" Once they turn away I go back to silently freaking out.

Ooooh shit. Oh fuck I just wrote Chopper out of the plot—

Fuck, I gotta get deathly ill for like five days, uuuh—

Do I just chug some muddy water and hope I don't drink a brain eating amoeba?!

A sudden stinging pain in my abdomen shocks me out of my panic. I absentmindedly smack my palm into it. I feel something small crunch.

I freeze.

I don't bother looking down, I just stare ahead. The bug falls from my hand. I lightly run my fingers over the bite.

Ah.

Problem solved.

With that incredibly grim thought, Sanji finally makes his appearance.

He comes charging out of the trees with a huge smile on his face. "Helloooo, Nami, Vivi, Ed! And the rest of you!" he calls. "I'm so glad you're all safe!" he cries, sprinting across the clearing with arms wide. Then he catches sight of the giants. "THE HELL IS THAT?! Is one of you Mr. 3?!" he screams.

"You know about Mr. 3?" Nami questions.

I shake the horror out of my body for the moment. I let a big smirk slide on my face and laugh. "Lemme guess, you've somehow managed to solve all our problems despite missing all the action?"

He seems to clock onto the fact that I'm half naked now. His face goes bright red. "Ed! You look absolutely stunning!"

I strike a pose. "I know."

Nami smacks me on the shoulder. "There's such a thing as too much confidence," she says with a smirk.

Sanji slides up behind me. “Now Ed, you’ll catch a cold dressed like that,” he says, holding his coat out to put my arms in.

“Thank you, kind sir,” I snort, sliding my arms into the fine fabric.

“My sincerest pleasure,” he responds, a heart shaped cloud of smoke puffing from his cigarette. Sanji drops to sit on a nearby rock. “Anyways, I just got done talking to that Mr. 0 guy on the Transponder Snail.”

Vivi’s face turns white. “Mr. 0?!”

Sanji nods. “Yup. I was in this weird hideout in the jungle. He thought I was Mr. 3, and I thought I’d let him believe it. Since I had him on the line, I went ahead and told him we were all dead.”

“So we’re finally free of people chasing us now that we can’t go anywhere?!” Usopp groans.

“Can’t go? We have unfinished business or something? And after I managed to get this…” Sanji asks, brandishing an Eternal Pose to Alabasta.

Everyone's jaws drop to the ground while I start cackling. I swing my arm around his shoulder and start shaking him. “That’s our boy! Let's get off this damn island!” I cheer. The crew around me starts celebrating.

“Alright Captain, we don’t have time to sit around!” Nami announces, snatching the last of the rice crackers away to get him to move. Zoro gets to his feet and starts walking on his cut up ankles.

“Zoro, you haven't forgotten about our hunting contest, right?” Sanji asks.

“Nope, but I won that. I caught a huge rhino,” Zoro says with a smirk. I see Dorry and Brogy behind us make faces at that conversation.

“Alright giant guys! We’ll be taking off now!” Luffy announces.

“But before we do, I’d like to give my two cents,” I butt in. “I’m just saying, after a hundred years of ties, you’d think you would get your God’s message. Whatever the hell you guys were fighting about was probably something you were both right about,” I state. They both exchange looks. I shrug. “But whatever suits your fancy, if you wanna fight for another hundred years, knock each other out.”

Nami grabs onto my shoulder and starts tugging me along. “Yeah yeah, keep your theories in your pants, detective,” she snarks.

I can’t help but laugh.

_____

“See, I told you mine was bigger than yours!”

“Your eyes just for decoration? Mine’s way bigger!”

“Dear god boys, stop arguing about your dick sizes!” I shout. After an entire walk spent listening to their shit I am fed the fuck up.

“Your stupid lizard is way smaller than my thing!”

“Your thing looks like it barely has usable meat!”

“Well at least mine has horns!”

“What does that have to do with anything—”

“HURRY UP AND GET YOUR ASSES ON THE SHIP!” Nami screams.

They both snap upright. “Yes ma’am!”

With the fear of Nami instilled in them, we’re ready to depart within minutes.

“If we go straight from here, it should take us to the exit on the west side of the island,” Nami explains as we all make our way to the front of the ship. The river's current delivers us safely through the thrice damned jungle without its internal issues.

“Hey! It’s the giants! They’ve come to see us off!” Luffy cheers, pointing ahead of us.

Indeed, flanking the exit to the island are our two giant pals. “Guys, I’d like to recommend we all grab onto something,” I announce. I’m given a few odd looks, but Usopp immediately takes my advice and grabs onto the railing in a vice grip.

Dorry and Brogy’s voices ring clear as we pass them.

“The most important reason why no humans get past this island…”

“...Still lies ahead of you.”

“You all risked your lives for the pride of our duel.”

“So in turn, no matter what foe…”

“We will never let them destroy your pride, friends!”

“Trust us and sail straight ahead! No matter what happens, sail only straight ahead!”

There’s confusion from my crewmates, But my Captain doesn’t hesitate in the slightest. “Got it! Straight!” Luffy declares.

“Let us meet again.”

“One day in the future.”

The ocean starts to swell. “Look up ahead!” Nami shouts. The Island Devourer rises large and imposing in front of us.

“A giant goldfish?! Why does that sound familiar..?” Usopp screeches.

“Get the helm, or we’ll be swallowed!” Nami shouts.

“Can’t! We’ll be going straight ahead! R — right Luffy?” Usopp states.

“Yup,” Luffy replies.

I cross my arms as we sail into its mouth. “Back into the belly of a beast,” I chuckle. Nami and Vivi grab onto each other as its mouth snaps shut.

“Straight ahead! Straight ahead!” Usopp chants as we sail through the fleshy… cave throat thing. The trip is slow at first, before we start picking up considerable speed.

This is actually kinda gross…

There's a crash and a bright flash of both red and blue light that surrounds and flies past us. The cavern glows brightly with energy that pierces straight in front of us like a firework. A huge hole is blown in the back of the goldfish, and we go flying out of it.

We soar through the sky until hitting water again.

“They’re just… so huge!” Luffy cheers.

“They cut the sea itself! The strength of Elbaf’s warriors is amazing!” Usopp cries.

I smile wide and laugh joyously. “Damn straight!”

Chapter End Notes

Ed, taking a plot bullet for Nami: WHEN I SAID I’D DO IT AGAIN I MEANT THAT SHIT

Next chapter is... Well it's certainly the next chapter. And it's over 4k. And it's entirely hurt/comfort, I am *milking* that tag. Just... Bring tissues, maybe?

Chapter 28: Chapter Twenty Eight: I Can Never Go Back To The Old House

Chapter Summary

Back to the Old House - The Smiths

I put my hands up. “Chill out you guys! I estimate about… five days before I’m deader than a dormouse, so that’s lots of time to get help!” My optimism is met with incredulity and no small amount of horror.

Chapter Notes

The sickfic interlude you all wanted and needed.

I’ve been continually coming back to this chapter to add shit, which is partially to blame for how long it got lmao (just know it almost hit 5k before I had to start rearranging shit between chapters — let’s just say Drum as an arc did a lot of moving) and I'm still not super sure I'm satisfied with it. BUT STILL PROUD RAAAGHHH!!!

Buckle up for over 4k of found family bonding and a mild amount of vomit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As our sailing evens out, I decide it's time to bite the bullet and bring up my impending doom. “Hey guys,” I start. The crew hums. “I don’t mean to alarm anyone, but I’ve been bitten by a prehistoric bug and I'm probably dying.”

There’s a moment of silence as the crew blinks. Then they explode into shock.

“WHAT?!”

“I’m sorry, *dying?!”*

“What happened with the bug spray?! You were so insistent!”

“Hahah yeah… I forgot to get myself.”

“EEEEEED!”

I put my hands up. “Chill out you guys! I estimate about… five days before I’m deader than a dormouse, so that’s lots of time to get help!” My optimism is met with incredulity and no small amount of horror.

“That’s… not a lot of time at all!” Usopp screeches, looking around frantically for the bucket.

“Are you gonna be sick right now?! Do you need something to eat?! Should we be worried about giant boils?!” Sanji asks panickedly, flapping his arms.

I rub the back of my neck. “Uuuuh — no, always, and no.”

Sanji nods with a fierce determination. “I’ll make soup!” he screams, running off into the galley.

Usopp runs across the deck. “I’ll get the bucket!”

Luffy runs into the aft. “I’ll get a slab of meat!”

Nami runs after him. “DON’T GET A SLAB OF MEAT HAVE YOU EVER EVEN *MET* A SICK PERSON—”

The door slams and I'm left alone on the deck with Zoro and Vivi. I clap and grin. "So… Zoro! How them ankles?"

He smacks a hand into his face. "You're incorrigible. Get me if you pass out." Then he opens the hatch to the men's cabin and disappears.

Vivi and I stare at each other for a second. "...Are you absolutely sure you're going to *die?"* she asks hesitantly.

I make a so-so gesture. "I mean... If I get proper medical attention, most likely not. If we keep chugging to Alabasta, I can almost guarantee it."

Her face pinches. "I see."

I have to turn my face away from her so she can't see the expression I make.

I forgot about her whole internal struggle with this. Dear god, she had enough trouble making the decision when it was fucking Nami! And now my life is in the hands of a girl who seems to hate my guts!

…Time to make it even harder.

"I want you to make an informed decision going forward," I start, taking a serious tone that has her focusing all her attention on me. "Nami has a newspaper stashed somewhere in our room, you'll have to ask her for it so you can read it yourself." I take a deep breath. "It'll say 300,000 members of the royal force have switched sides." Her face drops. "I want you to understand that that statistic could be propaganda. It *could* mean that's the total number over the course of the conflict so far, not that they've all defected at once, but we really won't know for sure until we get there."

Her bottom lip is quivering and her hands are clenched so tight blood starts to drip down her fingers. I can feel sweat starting to pour down my face, and I have to squint against the

sudden brightness of the deck.

"...Why would you tell me this?" she asks quietly. "You have to know this is an incentive to leave you for dead and go save my country."

I snort softly. "Yeah. I know. But our course right now is up to you. One dead, kinda shitty First Mate in exchange for your whole country? May as well be a no-brainer."

Her face scrunches up further. I hide my shaking hands behind my back. Talking this girl up to leaving me behind is actually… kind of scary, not knowing if she'll actually choose to save me.

…I don't want to die, but…

God, my head is swimming. Are we getting closer to a summer island? It's hot as fuck up here…

"Y — your country is very important… to you. I — I'll under… understand if you pick… it over…" I can't even make it through the sentence before I'm pitching forward. None of my limbs will respond to try and catch me.

I bang onto the deck. My ears start ringing.

Somehow this feels even worse than being drugged…

I think I can hear yelling, then the thud of footsteps or something vibrates through my cheek from where it's pressed into the deck. Gentle hands turn me onto my back, which I very vocally object to through groans.

Those same hands push my hair back to get a feel of my forehead. I press into their cool skin with another groan. I can't make out what anyone is saying…

The hand retracts and I whine in protest, before someone's arms (I think? They feel kinda weird. And long.) wind under me and gravity goes funny as I'm lifted into the air. I snuggle into soft fabric as a cacophony of voices assaults my ears.

I guess time slides away from me, because next thing I know I'm being gently deposited on the bed in the ladies room. I blearily blink my eyes open as something is shoved in my mouth.

I start chewing on it before a hand smacks into my shoulder. I frown but stop. I slowly, so as to not trigger the nausea I can feel slinking up my throat, turn my head towards whoever is sitting beside me.

It's actually several someones. Nami is right at my bedside staring intently at the thermometer in my mouth, Sanji is chewing on his sleeve looking close to tears, Usopp is brandishing our cleaning bucket like a shield, Luffy is standing with his arms crossed and frowning, and Vivi is in the back looking extremely uncomfortable with a newspaper clenched in her hands.

"Are we pregaming my wake?" I mumble around the stick in my mouth.

"Don't make jokes right now," Nami scolds, pulling the thermometer out. Her eyes widen at the number she reads. "People should *not* be 40 degrees! How are you not already dead?!"

I make the shaka sign. "Built different," I mumble. Nami smacks a cool damp towel onto my forehead and I melt into the bed with a sigh.

Luffy creeps closer and pokes me in the cheek. "Is it painful being sick?"

Both Sanji and Usopp shrug. "Never been sick," they say in unison.

“Are you people even human?!” Nami screeches, sending me an apologetic look when I wince at the volume. “Of course it's painful! A 40 degree fever is crazy! That’s enough to kill them!”

I shut my eyes against the pounding of my skull. “My brain is cooking in my head…”

“Cooking? Can we eat your brain?!” Luffy asked, awe and a little bit of excitement in his voice.

I squint at him, slightly accusatory. “Luffy, remember what I said about not being your first cannibalism victim? That still applies.”

He frowns. “Aw. Ok.”

Then his eyes bug out, same time as the other boys. “WAIT, *DIE?!”*

Nami smacks all of them on the head at once. *“Be quiet!”* she hisses.

I lazily wave my hand through the air. “D’worry. There’s a whole 3 degrees between me and a normal person's limit right now!”

Nami slaps another cool towel over my eyes. “If this fever doesn’t kill you I will.”

I give a gooey smile in the direction I think she is. “You wouldn’t! You looooove me!”

My hand is snatched up in hers and pressed to her forehead. “Yeah, well there’s gonna be nothing to love but a memory if we don’t get you help asap.”

I sigh and frown. “It’s up to the princess. If we can somehow book it to Alabasta in under a week I might…” I move the cloth off my eyes with my free hand. I stop talking when I notice Vivi is crying.

“Stop,” she whispers. “Your life isn’t a bargaining chip, and I refuse to exchange it for a chance to get home earlier. Those 300,000 defecting soldiers… they’ll just have to wait until you're better!” she announces, fat tears still rolling down her cheeks and onto the paper.

I stare, open mouthed.

“Ah. Ok.”

Then I pass out.

_____

Gentle hands run methodically through my hair. Rock music plays softly somewhere in the room. When I open my eyes all I can see is my sister's smiling face. Her soothing voice vibrates through the air in familiar wavelengths.

The ocean is stirring in my stomach.

An unfamiliar voice tickles at the edge of my consciousness. Almost impossible to make out aside from the odd syllable. Probably not important.

“Are you feeling any better?” my sister asks.

I push my head into her hand like a demanding cat. “No,” I whine. Everything feels hot and cold at once, my nerves are screaming under my skin, my head pounds along to the music and the water continues to sway in my stomach.

“Make it go away,” I whine again.

My sister laughs softly. “No can do.” Her hands pass through my hair again. The ocean swells in my belly.

“Where..?” I mumble.

My sister laughs again. “Dad’s down in his office, mom’s at work, and I’m right here.”

Sweat drips off my face. “Thought you left,” I choke out. The hands stop. “Thought you left,” I repeat.

Her fingers retreat from my hair. “Why would I do that?” she grits out, sounding pained.

That unfamiliar voice pierces through the fog for just a second. A name, a title or something.

I can’t focus on it. I call out my sister's name again. The ocean churns in my stomach. The music gets louder.

My chest starts to heave. Breath shortens. Head pounds.

The ocean surges.

As the music crescendos the ocean rises up my throat and—

I tip myself over the side of the bed and vomit. It burns and it hurts it hurts it *hurts*—

A hand rubs soothingly down my back as I hack. I croak out my sister's name.

“No, Ed.”

I scrunch up my face. “Ed?”

The hand stills. “Yeah. You, Ed.”

I heave into the bucket my head is apparently inside of. “Ah, me.”

I squint the tears out of my eyes. I take my head out of the bucket. Someone’s hand comes up and wipes my mouth off with a cloth or something.

“Fucking *ow* ,” I croak.

Nami stares down at me with concern. “Who were you—”

I’m saved from Nami’s question by someone throwing open the hatch and thundering down the steps. Sanji tumbles into the room frantically. He spots me, Nami and the bucket and heaves a sigh of relief. “Oh thank god, I thought you died!”

I give him a wry smile. “Not yet.” Nami slaps my arm.

Zoro trots down the stairs behind Sanji. “They need you up top. Usopp said there’s weird weather.”

Nami frowns and shoots me a concerned look, then turns back to Zoro. “Ok. You stay and watch Ed, Sanji you come with me.”

Zoro frowns. “What? Why do I have to—” Nami is already grabbing the bucket then up and out the hatch with Sanji before he finishes. He stares up for a second while I struggle into a sitting position in the bed. “Lay back down,” Zoro grunts.

I flip him off. “Go fuck yourself,” I say with as much cheer as I can muster. He levels me a blank look and pushes me back into the bed. “You’re lame,” I sigh.

“And you’re sick. Shut up and rest,” he replies, slouching down onto Nami’s vacated chair.

We sit in silence for a minute.

“Sorry you have to watch me. I know you’d rather be training. I’d offer to sit on your back while you do push ups, but it would probably end with me puking on you,” I snort.

Zoro stares at me impassively. “Your breath smells like shit,” he says blankly.

I grin to show off my teeth at him. “Gee, sorry princess, I’ll get better just for you,” I say sarcastically.

Zoro rolls his eyes. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

I frown at him, then turn my head to the ceiling. “Yeah. I know.”

We return to silence.

“You know, I’m probably going to miss most of this next adventure,” I start. “So, while I’m here mentally, let’s cue up some bets,” I say with a sly smile.

Zoro rolls his eyes. “I’m not taking a sick person's money,” he groans.

My smile widens. “Good thing you never beat me at these then! I bet where we’re going is gonna be snowy,” I state.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because I don’t like snow. 2,000 berri.”

He rolls his eyes again. “Alright. Next?”

I hum. “Bet we’re gonna get a new crew member outta this.”

He tilts his head. “I dunno. Luffy’s pretty particular about his people.”

I grin. “Yup! Another 2,000 berri.” Zoro sighs but waves his hand for me to continue. “Bet someone’s gonna get shot this time. It’s gotta happen eventually.”

“But if you’re gonna be sick the whole time, who's gonna provoke the shooter?” he snarks.

I fake laugh. “You’re so funny! 2,000 berri.” He shoots me a look. I give him the stink eye back. “6,000 berri says you’re gonna fall in a freezing river.”

His face goes incredulous. “Why a freezing one?”

“Because I’m going to be right about the snow,” I reply matter-of-factly.

He scoffs. “I‘m not stupid enough to fall into a river. You’re on.” He really does think too highly of himself.

“I bet someone is gonna eat our boat.”

That gets him squawking. *“Eat?!* You’re delusional from the sickness.”

I laugh. “No! Something that stupid *has* to happen while I’m out of commission! It has to!” He groans, long and suffering.

“I’m willing to put 8,000 berri on it!” I announce, cackles breaking out of my throat. One of them catches on something and sends me into a painful coughing fit.

As I hack a lung up I can see Zoro looking around frantically, my guess is for a bucket in case this triggers some heaving action. He shoves a glass of water into my hands that I suck down gratefully.

Once I’m sure I can speak without dying, I give him a big smile. “I bet… I’ll be just fine.”

Zoro scoffs. “I don’t take suckers bets.”

I laugh hoarsely, smile softening. “Sure you don’t. I’m looking forward to my other 20,000 berri then.”

Zoro smirks. “So am I. Looks like I’ll finally get a payout for once.”

The last thing I remember is laughing.

———

A voice is calling out to me again. Playfully, like it's not expecting an answer. It sings to me in unfamiliar hymns, a chorus of strange chimes and something like the twang of a triangle.

"Princeling," it calls. "Poor stupid Princeling. You really do make the most fascinating choices."

I feel like less than a concept. Reduced past my very atoms, just a vague idea or the fragments of a soul. I can't open my nonexistent mouth, but I call back regardless.

Surprise. I understand the emotion it communicates like it's broadcasting it into the air itself. "You heard me!" it exclaims joyfully. "Wonderful! Ah Princeling, how I've longed to see you!"

The world bleeds into colour around me, not real in the slightest but I know where I am like I know the sun will rise in the morning. I'm stood in the goddamn Domino's parking lot. There's a hand holding mine, and I'm face to face with a red Honda Civic.

I don't understand. My mind is panicky but I can't move at all.

"You don't understand?"

How the fuck did this thing understand that?!

"Ah. I see. You made quite a journey, looks like things are going a little different for you. No matter! You'll be fine! Let's chat when you're more… awake, shall we?"

What does that mean? Who are you?!

“Hm. I think it’s too early for this. Why don’t you wake up now? Go see your monkey boy!”

The world turns into motion. The hand disappears and I stumble, suddenly cognizant of my body. The car jolts into motion towards me at high speeds.

Wait! Wait wait please who are you why am I here HELP ME ***WAIT—***

Impact.

———

I’m ripped from sleep with a scream tearing free from my throat. My limbs go flailing and I nearly throw myself from the bed. White noise blocks out the rest of the world while I work myself into hysterics.

Hands clamp down on my wrists. I jolt forward with another scream, my eyes snapping to a dark pair overflowing with urgency and concern.

Oh. Captain. Safe.

I make a pathetic whine, all of the fight draining out of me in an instant. I slump forward into my Captain with a pained wheeze and a hiccuping sob. I wrap my arms around Luffy. They nearly slide off his shoulders from the sheer amount of shaking they’re doing before his own come to grab me just as tight, if not tighter.

My shaking fingers clutch at the back of his shirt with all the strength I can muster through the illness induced weakness. I smother my tears and gasps for breath in his shoulder. An unending stream of comfort spills from Luffy’s mouth right into my ear.

My head is pounding and my unsteadiable breath is not helping. It feels like my brain is full of helium, and I can hear a cacophony of footsteps and panicked questions from the rest of my crew as they crash into the room.

I press my burning forehead into Luffy's neck harder. I'm losing control of my arms, all the strength rapidly leaving them as I slowly slide into the bed. Luffy's arms loosen but he doesn't let go and follows me down.

He frowns down at me worriedly. I'm still breathing way too fast for my sick body to keep up with, and I can see black spots dancing in the corner of my eyes. I try to reach up to Luffy with my hand, but I'm too damn weak to get it more than a few inches off the rumpled sheets.

Luffy's own hand catches mine and brings it up to his neck, pressing my fingers into the steady pulse there. I suck in a deep breath. My shoulders relax and my head falls back on the pillow. "S'fine. Alive."

Luffy's hand tightens over mine. "You're alive. I'm alive. We're all alive," he reiterates.

I sigh, a shaky smile making its way onto my face. Luffy's skin is warm under my palm.

I slip back into unconsciousness.

_____

The next time I wake, it's much more pleasant. There's a comforting weight on top of me and the soft buzz of snoring accompanied by hushed talking. I peel my eyes open.

Luffy is splayed on top of me, cheek pressed into my stomach and drool pooling on a discarded towel. In the corner I spot Nami and Vivi, pressed close and having a conversation. I watch them for a moment, not able to make out what they're saying.

Nami places a gentle hand on Vivi's shoulder. Vivi gazes softly up into Nami's eyes.

Oh hell no. I'm not background witnessing this shit.

"If you two are gonna have a romantic moment, do it outside please," I mumble, trying not to aggravate my dry feeling throat. They both startle and whip their heads around to me. Then their faces turn bright red.

Nami's mouth opens and closes a few times before she shuts it with a snap, turns away, grabs Vivi by the wrist, and heads out the hatch.

I snicker quietly under my breath. "Thank you," Luffy murmurs into my stomach. I hum. "They wouldn't stop talking and I didn't want to interrupt them," he giggles. I run my hands through his messy black hair.

Wait…

"Where's your hat?"

He sends me an incredibly fond look I can't even begin to dwell on for fear of crying. One of his hands lazily points above me. I tilt my head up and soft yellow straw comes into view.

"You just get to have it while I'm in here though," he says petulantly. I gently reach up and grab it, holding it in front of me to examine it. Three nearly invisible parallel lines run through the top, the only evidence of our encounter with Buggy aside from the pale scar on my stomach.

This hat has seen things I could only dream of.

I place it on my Captain's head.

“I think it suits you much better, my king-to-be,” I state, a big smile gently stretching my face. His face lights up, smile beaming and radiant. It warms something in my stomach, comforting in a way few things have been since I got sick.

“You’ll be there to see it, right?” he asks, tipping the brim of the hat over his face.

I tip it back up so I can look him right in the eyes. “Unquestionably. You’re gonna take me to the top,” I state, not an inch of doubt in my voice. I hold my pinkie up to him.

He smiles that eye squinting smile again and I return it gratefully. He hooks his pinkie into mine.

I’m gonna be fine.

_____

The second day is worse.

I’m barely conscious, but able to gasp that I’m somehow still alive and in a room with Sanji and I think Vivi. I’m using what little brainpower I can scrounge up to keep my breathing as even as possible so I don’t hurl again.

Then the ship starts shaking like crazy. I smother a groan into my pillow, tingling hands coming up to press into my eyes. Then Sanji is right up in my face. “I’m going upstairs to check it out, Vivi’ll keep an eye on you.”

I slap him lightly on the cheek. “Kick whoever it is off th’ship. M’tryna sleep,” I slur out. He gives me a big smile, then takes off.

There's a brief silence as Vivi comes up and checks my temperature. "I'm sure it'll be fine," she murmurs.

Then there's an influx of screaming and a barrage of gunfire. I groan again. "These fuckers!"

Vivi gets up looking like she's gonna run upstairs, so I grab onto her hand.

"S'fine. Don't bother," I say desperately. The *don't leave me in here alone* is left unsaid. She looks at me for a second, then takes back her hand and runs upstairs.

Time slips away after that, with no one to tie me down to reality.

_____

"Ed, darling, I have soup!" a voice, distorted but undeniably real, calls out to me. I blink open bleary eyes and tilt my head to see Sanji, with a bowl of promised soup in hand, smiling at me from the chair.

"W'kinda soup?" I mumble, lips feeling cracked and tacky.

He scoots closer and places the bowl aside for a moment to gently guide me into a seated position, propping a pillow behind me and brushing sweaty hair from my face. "Bone broth, diced potato and peas, chives, and some of Mosshead's stupid dinosaur. If you find the spices too strong let me know," he explains softly.

I hum, breathing it in. "Smells delicious." He grins and brings a spoonful to my lips.

I burst into tears at the first taste.

Sanji panickedly pulls back at the spoon and leans closer. “What?! Is it too hot?!” he questions, scrambling for the bucket. “You can spit it out, I won’t be upset!”

I wave him off, pressing a hand to my mouth as fresh tears roll down over top of it. “It’s fine, I promise!” My words are watery, and don’t fulfil their purpose in getting him to calm down. It almost seems to make him panic more, actually. “I’m sorry. It’s just really good!” I blubber, fanning my face. He blinks his wide baby blues at me. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know why I’m crying!”

He gets closer to my face, thumbing away some of my unending tears. “You’re crying because it’s *good?!”* he asks incredulously.

I make grabby hands for the soup. “Yeah. More please,” I weep. He lets out a short breath and spoons out some more soup.

It’s so goddamn good.

Though nausea is a lingering fear as I eagerly sip spoonful after spoonful of soup, I can’t make myself care.

“Thank you, angel eyes,” I sigh once I’ve finished the bowl, slumping down into bed fucking exhausted. Being almost too tired to eat a whole meal is goddamn depressing.

Sanji wipes my face of sweat, tears and soup with a damp towel, a soft little smile playing on his lips. “Angel eyes?” he asks, amused.

I sleepily nod into his hand. “Angel eyes,” I confirm.

Sanji’s soft laughter sees me into unconsciousness.

_____

I jolt myself awake. Soft snoring and the tic of the clock punctuate the quiet of the night. A quick glance at the offending object reveals it’s around three in the morning. I push myself up into a sitting position, wiping sweat from my face.

My movement causes Usopp, whose head was thrown back on top of my blanket, to slide to the side. I catch him and move him to a better position for his neck.

Vivi and Nami are huddled close, both resting on Karoo and draped in a blanket. Zoro is lounged open mouthed on the desk chair. Luffy is spread across the floor, a foot propped up on Zoro and arms spread like a starfish. Sanji is absent, probably on watch.

I lay back down and smile. My hand comes up to absentmindedly card through Usopp's thick curls. He makes a sleepy hum and rolls his head back further.

This must be pretty hard on him, after what happened to his mom. Sanji too for that matter.

I’m gonna pull through for them. Fuck being sick.

I sigh and drift back off.

Chapter End Notes

Those Niquil fever dreams hit different, am I right? Also crying over soup when you're sick is universal. Don't tell me I'm wrong it'll make me feel bad.

Also I (after like uuuuuh 10 or smth years) got my ears repierced today so huge win for the girlypops. Can't wait to wake up in pain because my goofy ass can't sleep if I'm not on my side.

GEAR 5 STEADILY APPROACHES—

Chapter 29: Chapter Twenty Nine: Just Give Me A Second, Darling, To Clear My Head

Chapter Summary

Unfinished Business - White Lies

I squint against the light and take a couple deep breaths. “Captain,” I mumble through dry and cracked lips. He turns back to me. I shakily raise my hand, pinkie out. He entwines it in his own. “Take me to the top,” I grin.

Chapter Notes

Another top 5 song of mine. The Mumford and Sons cover of this had an unrealistically large impact on my middle school life. Don't read too hard into that.

We're officially over 100k words on here! Wooo!! Lmao this chapter *also* almost went over the 4k mark, I didn't even realize I started pushing closer to that number as the chapters went on, but quite a few of them go over that threshold.

(Big Edit™ future message here again. God you little idiot you have no idea what becomes of you.)

Let us never forget that Chopper is the token Canadian. *Never.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I barely stir when someone picks me up from the bed and guides my arms into a winter coat. It’s getting harder and harder to keep cognizant during my awake spells, and as soon as I’m up I feel sleep trying to drag me back down.

I’m hiked up onto someone's back and shove my face into their neck as I’m assaulted by cold air. I don’t bother trying to listen to the talk going on around me, I just try my best to not pass out.

“I did not survive Covid to kick it to *this,”* I grumble into whoever’s holding me’s neck. I think they snort, but that might just be me imagining people think I’m funny while delirious.

I pass back out.

_____

I’m awoken by repetitive slapping on my face. I crack open my eyes and see Luffy crouched over me gearing up for another slap.

“You keep smacking me, I'm liable to rock your shit,” I croak.

There’s a few cheers from the room's occupants. Luffy stares down at me. “Hey, the only way to see a doctor is to climb the mountain. So we gotta climb the mountain.” The yelling from the others in the room is unintelligible outside of my small sphere of hearing. “It’s fine. I’ll carry them up,” Luffy says, turning back to the others.

I squint against the light and take a couple deep breaths. “Captain,” I mumble through dry and cracked lips. He turns back to me. I shakily raise my hand, pinkie out. He entwines it in his own. “Take me to the top,” I grin.

Luffy grins right back. “Unquestionably.” He stumbles over the word just enough that I let out a hoarse laugh.

The next few minutes are liquid. There's vague arguing and some movement. I think I get tied to Luffy's back and then we’re back in the cold.

“I hate fucking Canada… Fucking snow…” I grumble, gnawing on Luffy's hood.

“Is this place called Canada?” Luffy questions.

“...No. No it’s not,” the weird guy, Dalton I think? replies.

I drift for a couple minutes before I'm jolted by Luffy suddenly taking off running. "C'mon Sanji! Let's go before Ed dies!"

"Don't *say* that, you idiot!" Sanji screams back.

I huff a laugh. "Don't kill me on the way up, please," I mumble.

Then I slip back into unconsciousness.

———

It doesn't last all that long. I'm rudely awoken by some violent thrashing. I squint my eyes open to a faceful of giant white rabbit monster what thE FUCK IS THAT—

"FUCK OFF!" I scream, no matter the havoc it wreaks on my throat. Then I jam out my leg and nail one of the things right on the nose.

"Ed!"

"STOP FIGHTING YOU'RE SICK!"

I throw my head back to shake my hood off, just to feel some of that cold mountain air on my burning face. I groan long and loud as Luffy continues to jump and dodge these weird monsters.

"Just start running!" Sanji hollers.

My eyes roll back again as we start moving again.

_____

A familiar voice calls my name. "You're gonna catch a cold! Put a better coat on! At least a scarf or hat! And stay out of the road, a car would flatten you like a crepe!"

I stick my tongue out at my mom. "Consequences are for people who care! I'm gonna go stick my face in a snowbank!"

Oh, I remember this. I got super sick after this.

...

Wow I really should have listened to my mother more.

"You don't seem like the 'listens to instructions' type."

Oh I'm not. Well, sometimes. I like having instructions so I know what I'm doing, but getting policed on my actions by people I don't give a shit about is—

Wait a fucking minute ***what.***

"Oh you can hear me again! Hi there, Princeling!"

Whomst?!

“Don’t even worry about it! I’m really just a third party observer this time. Looks like the monkey boy is in a pretty tough spot… Oh well!”

Excuse me?!

“Yeah, there's like an avalanche and some Lapins… Haha your science experiment just crashed!”

Oh my god what the fuck is happening. Did you just call Sanji a science experiment?!

“Oh I don’t think I’m a god per say… Did you not know about your cook guy?”

No, I knew. Also what do you mean ***per say?***

“I think you should worry about other things right now. Or just stop worrying all together.”

So even when I’m hallucinating god really is kind of a dick. Got it.

“Rude! You weren’t this rude last time. Whatever happened to manners?”

I have amazing manners, you just haven't proven that you deserve them.

“Ooh! Spicy! I kinda like this version of you.”

You keep saying shit like that. What does that mean?

“Hmmm. I don’t wanna tell yet. Oh my, things are getting real rough out there. Wowie, your monkey boy really is something else. He hasn’t changed much.”

I am very confused.

The weird voice is fading to static between words, like a bad radio connection. Other snippets of sounds start buzzing in. The sound of glassware, liquids, some rattling. Another voice, more… substantial and gravely.

“Doctorine is in the house! Haha, I like this one.”

The hot old lady?

“Did this unconscious child just call me hot?”

Huh?

“Haha! I think we’re done here. You have fun now!”

Wait wait what? Hey! Don’t go!

Shit!

_____

I blink my eyes open to stone ceilings. Weird shit hangs from the walls, there's multiple skulls mounted around me and I’m not all that tempted to find out what animals they belonged to.

There's the weight of an icepack on my forehead and I can hear the clack of hooves on stonework floors, then the rhythmic scraping of a mortar and pestle. I blink my eyes a couple more times.

Well that was fucking weird. I think I was dreaming…

I guess I always did get weird dreams from Nyquil. Eh.

A quick glance over my person reveals someone changed my shirt at some point, now in a soft button up, though I can still feel my many pocketed pants on beneath the blankets. I can see my gun belt hanging off the end of the bed as well.

I turn my head to the side and make direct eye contact with Chopper. The fur covered bipedal little reindeer twitches his blue nose at me. We blink at each other for a second.

I startle and jerk forward a little. “Oh god. You scared the shit outta me!” I laugh.

He does a double take, then screams and runs around the open door frame. He does a stupid little side lean thing that hides half of his antlers and red hat behind the door frame while the rest of him remains visible.

“...You’re doing that wrong.” I tell him gently. He makes a squeak and flips his pose. I snort.

“Sh — shut up! Human!” he screeches. “By the way! Are you feeling better?” his voice slowly peeters into a much more reserved tone. I blink. Hearing a voice come from the little reindeer is surprising, no matter how much I was expecting it.

“Definitely better, if only by a little bit.” My nonchalant response seems to shock him more than if I started screaming. Which he does. He scrambles backwards and trips over

something, sending another something crashing to the ground which sends more shit falling and shattering.

Suffice to say, it's loud.

"Keep it down, Chopper!" an old woman's voice hollers, before its owner comes striding into the room. She's tall, with long silver hair, and wearing fucking awesome low riding purple pants and a croptop that showcases her bellybutton piercing.

She flicks up her sunglasses when she sees I'm awake. She cackles as she strides over and pokes my forehead. "38.2 degrees celsius. Your fever has gone down, that's good." I blink as she starts guzzling down wine.

"Hi?" I say, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm Dr. Kureha. You can call me Doctorine," she grins, wrinkles pulling at her face.

I grin up at her. "Cool! I'm E. D. Domino, call me Ed. It's a pleasure to meet you!"

She raises one of her eyebrows with a grin. "E. D. Domino, eh? How interesting." I give her a big eye crunching grin. "You want the secret to my eternal youth?" she suddenly asks.

I scratch my chin. "I mean if you're giving that information out, sure."

"Haha! It'll cost you!" she cackles.

I wave my hand. "Alright, then I'm good. A debt to a woman like you would be scary."

“Clever. You’re in the castle at the top of the mountain,” she tells me, walking over to a table and putting down her wine before coming back and taking a seat on the bed.

I hum. “My idiots around here somewhere?”

“Those other two boys are in the next room, sleeping very deeply. Couple of tough guys, eh?” she says, then rucks up my shirt to take a look at my stomach. There's a smattering of bruise-like spots and splotches originating from where I got bit. “This is the problem. You were bitten by a bug called the Kestia. It’s a poisonous tick that thrives in high humidity jungles. Its bite spreads a bacteria that causes high fever and severe pain, among other symptoms, that get worse over the course of five days until they kill you.”

She pokes a few places on my stomach that have me flinching back with an involuntary giggle. She shoots me a look I sheepishly smile at. “Sorry. I never really stopped being ticklish.”

“...Right. Anyway, given the affected area and its progression, my guess is you’re on your third day. Funnily enough, your system seemed to be fighting it off supernaturally well. You might have even made it three more days, crazy as it seems.” She grins at me. “But if you hadn’t gotten here in those three days, you definitely would have gone to heaven.”

I snort. “As if I would have gotten anywhere *near* heaven. I think they have a warrant out for my arrest.”

She lets loose a loud cackle. “You and I both, honey!”

I give the woman a sly smile. “Only difference is they want me so they can send me to hell personally, and they want you back as an angel.”

That forces another cackle from her mouth. Doctrine gives me a keen look. “Sweet talk all you want, you still need to stay here and recover.” I pout. “I want to know how you even managed to *get* this. Kestia used to be called the five day disease, but I heard it died out over a hundred years ago. Were you romping around half-naked in an ancient forest or something?”

I slap my hand over my mouth to stop the snort I let out. She shoots me a disbelieving look. “In my defence I did bring bug spray! …I just used it on everyone but myself,” I explain with an awkward laugh.

“You are one crazy kid.” Then she slaps a hand into my chest and pushes me back into the bed. “Now stay in bed. Your treatment isn’t done.”

I sigh. “You got an estimate on my recovery time?”

She rolls her eyes. “This disease usually takes ten days to fully treat. With medicines as advanced as mine, you’re looking at three days. Add in your crazy immune system, I can get you up and out of here in under two.”

I groan long into my hands. “You gonna try and pin me to the bed with scalpels if I argue?”

She cackles again. “You’re a smart one! Patients only leave this castle when they’re cured or dead.” I sigh and give her a sad thumbs up.

There’s a sudden influx of screaming from down the hall, then Chopper, Sanji and Luffy come running through the room. They’re out and crashing through the castle faster than I can blink.

I turn to Doctorine with an apologetic look. “My Captain and cook are… idiots. Stupid ones. Sorry they’re chasing your kid.”

She gives me a side eye, then looks off to the door. “Chopper can handle them.” She throws another look over her shoulder at me. “You’re not curious about him?”

I slump back down in the bed with a small smile. “My Captain is made out of rubber. I ate dinosaur soup this week. I’m recovering from a prehistoric illness. I don’t give a single shit

about whatever makes Chopper, Chopper." I wink at the smiling doctor. "You don't seem like the kind of woman to tolerate a brat, so I'm sure he's a great kid. I'll have to thank him for helping to save my crew."

She lets out a low cackle. "You call those boys lots of things, but you've yet to call them friends," she says.

I blink, then frown. "Have I?"

Oh… Yeah I think the only person I've called a friend here to their face was Nami back on Cocoyashi…

I guess I may still be subconsciously trying to put distance between me and them. Maybe there's a small part of me, however stupid, still holding onto the fact that I'm in a fictional world with anime characters.

Hm.

"They are my friends. And I'm very grateful you treated them," I state.

She gives me another keen look, then gets up to retrieve her wine bottle and sits down at the table. "Whatever you say, kid."

_____

"Ed! Are you better?!" Luffy wails, clinging to my waist while I try to wrestle him away from the food Sanji brought me with my feet.

"Well on my way! Stay the fuck away from my food!"

Sanji kneels by the bed and stares up at me with watery eyes. “So you’re not dying? Is the food helping? Do you need more?” he asks.

I use my free hand to push him away. “This is fine! I’m fine! All of you back off and give me space!”

Luffy gets his grubby little hands just a little too close to my dish so I use my foot to kick him at Doctorine’s table. He smacks his head into the chair then looks up at Doctorine with a wide smile.

“Join my crew! Please old lady!” Luffy asks, smacking his palms on the table.

Doctrine stares at him impassively. “Your name is Luffy, right?” He nods. She hoists herself out of her chair and slams her foot into Luffy, sending him flying across the room into the wall. “You’d better watch your language!” she huffs. “I’m still youthful in my 130’s.”

Sanji whistles. “You’re a tough old lady.” He gets a one way ticket straight into the opposite wall.

I shake my head. “Numbskulls.”

“You want me to be a pirate, ridiculous! And a waste of my precious time. I’m not interested in the ocean,” she grunts.

Luffy staggers his way back to the table. “You don’t have to care. Just come with us. Let's have an adventure, old lady!”

“You just don’t learn,” Doctrine huffs. The boys seem to finally clock onto our extra observer. They both jump up and start chasing after Chopper who’s been crouched in the doorway, Doctrine following close behind. I groan and roll over in the bed.

“Don’t worry Ed, my love! I’ll cook you up some delicious reindeer soup!” Sanji hollers as the group tears back through the space.

“Or don’t!” I groan back.

“I’ll eat *you* before I let you eat my reindeer!” Doctrine shouts, chasing the boys right out of the room.

I stare after them out the open door. A chilly breeze blows through and I shiver. “Inconsiderate jackasses,” I grumble tentatively poking a toe out from under the toasty covers.

“You should stay in bed!” a squeaky voice stops me. Chopper tip toes back into the room, head on a swivel. “Are they gone?” He scuttles over to the door and shuts it. “Doctorine’s medicine works very well, so the fever should be gone soon. But the Kestia may still be in your body. You need an injection and more rest.”

I snuggle back under the covers with a groan. “Uuugh. I hate needles.”

He shoots me a look over his shoulder. “Too bad, human!”

I shoot him the stink eye back. “Don’t be a shit.” He scrunches his blue nose at me. “Anyway, thanks for helping my boys,” I grin.

He takes a step back. “Shut up! I don’t want gratitude from a human!” Chopper yells, doing his funny little dance with a goofy expression on his face.

I can’t help but burst out laughing. “You’re making me feel even more stupid for getting startled by you when I woke up!”

He glares at me. “Because I’m a monster?!”

I raise an amused eyebrow at him. “No? I just woke up and was previously hallucinating. Seeing *anything* right away was scary.”

He blinks. “But you weren’t scared of… me?”

I give him a soft smile. “No, Chopper. You’re not scary to me.”

He furrows his furred brow. “That’s weird. *You’re* weird.”

I laugh again. “I see crazier shit than you on the regular now, so I can’t let anything make me stumble! Besides, my absolute monster of a Captain takes naps on me. Nothing can be scarier than a half asleep and hungry Luffy.”

I say this with the confidence of a person who had almost been eaten by their Captain. Multiple times.

“...So are you really pirates?” Chopper mumbles, trotting closer to the bed and perching on the opposite end from me.

“Yes indeed,” I smirk.

“Really?”

“Really really.”

He scoots closer. “Do you have a flag?”

I nod with the appropriate amount of seriousness. “Uh huh. Our badass sniper painted it. It’s up on our ship, she’s a real beauty.” I give him a sly smile. “You wanna be a pirate?”

He throws himself off the bed to scramble away from me. “DON’T BE STUPID! WHO TOLD YOU THAT?!” he screams, vocal chords hitting notes most singers can only dream of.

I burst out laughing again. “Alright! Sorry!”

He eventually calms to the point when he sits down on a chair. “Why do you call him a monster? Your Captain, I mean,” Chopper asks, eyeing me like I’m gonna pounce on him.

I smile. “I call it as I see it, especially for a boy like him. Our whole crew is made of monsters, now that I think about it.” I grin up at the ceiling. “But I really do adore them. I’m pretty sure my Captain saved me.”

There’s no other word for it. The freedom I’ve felt since coming here… It’s unlike anything I had ever experienced. I couldn’t imagine losing it.

“He’s damn crazy, got a beautiful dream and a beautiful heart. A little stupid, if I’m being honest. But he loves like he’s hungry for it. We all do.” What else would happen when you throw a bunch of emotionally stunted weirdos together? I side eye Chopper with another smile. “You wanna come with us?”

He throws himself off the chair. “WHAT?!”

“Yeah! We need a doctor because we’re stupid and get hurt *often,* and if you come with Doctorine might let me leave earlier without trying to skin me!” I laugh.

He looks like he wants to fucking run. “But..! But..! I’m a reindeer who can stand on two legs and talk!”

I smirk. “Yeah, that hadn’t exactly escaped my attention.”

“I also have a blue nose!” he cries.

I nod. “Yup, it’s super cute.”

The indignant look he gets is immediately wiped off as Luffy and Sanji’s voices start bouncing off the halls, coming closer by the second. I lift up the covers with an inviting smile and a ‘come hither’ gesture. Chopper visibly hesitates for a second.

“Where are you reindeer?! We just want to eat you!” Luffy hollers from the hall. Chopper’s eyes go wide as dinner plates and he lunges under the covers. I flatten them down just as the boys come running in.

“Ed! Have you seen the reindeer?!” they both scream in unison. I wordlessly point out the door. “THANKS!” the two boys scream, running out the door. Doctrine comes screaming through the room after them, slamming the door on her way out. I snicker quietly.

Chopper shimmies out from under the covers and gives me a long look. “...I’m not going to thank a human,” he mumbles.

I laugh. “That’s fine. Hey, can I give you something?” He gives me another distrustful look while I rustle through my pockets. “Aha! I’ve been saving this bad boy since we left Loguetown. I’m not overly fond of sweets, but they didn’t have any dark chocolate so this is what I have,” I wave my chocolate bar in front of his suddenly much more interested face.

“You don’t like sweets?” he mumbles, eyes tracking the chocolate like a cat with a laser.

I chuckle. “Nah, too much sugar makes my teeth feel weird. You want it?” He makes a jerk forward but seems to think better of it at the last second. “Consider it thanks for putting up

with my boys," I say with an amused smile, placing the bar between us on the bed.

He waits a half second before snatching it up, unwrapping it, and shoving it in his mouth at mach speed. I blink as he makes blissful noises, literal sparkles coming from his eyes. He snaps out of it when he notices I'm staring. He makes a half cough, turning away embarrassed.

I smirk at him. "You don't get much sweets up here?"

He hums. "I mean… not a *whole* lot."

I take a peek out the window at the snow covered peak. "You don't have maple syrup out here?"

His eyes light up again. "Yes, actually! It's a staple of Drum Island!"

I throw my head back and laugh. This place really *is* like Canada!

Then my boys come barreling through the door again. "YOU'RE IN HERE, REINDEER?!" they both shout. Chopper screams, jumps off the bed, and takes off through the other door with both of my boys on his heels.

"Again with the open doors…" I mutter, shimming further under the covers with the smile still firmly fixed on my face.

Doctorine plops down into one of the chairs with a sigh. "Those brats sure are quick." She crosses her arms and legs. "I don't much like what you were just doing… Tempting my boy while I'm not around."

I smirk over at her. "I'm a mothers worst nightmare. Watch your back or I'll teach him to be an anarchist."

She cackles, head thrown back. “Go ahead and try! Just take him with you.”

I smile back at her. “My Captain is doubtlessly enamoured with him by now, so he has an invitation. It’s only a matter of getting him to accept it.”

She gives me a wide grin. “It’s not gonna be easy. He’s got a scar on his heart even my medicine can’t heal.” It really does make me sad, how lonely Chopper must always feel… “But I suppose you don’t want to hear about his plights from me. You seem the type to want to hear it right from the source, or maybe you already have him all figured out!” she cackles.

I laugh too. “I’m a detective, doctor. You don’t have to spell out how difficult his life has been for me. It's obvious he’s been hurt by a lot of people.” I sober out at the end. Never feeling like you can fit in anywhere… yeah, that’s something I can empathize with.

“Can you heal his heart?” Doctorine suddenly asks.

I flash a determined grin. “We sure as shit can try.”

Chapter End Notes

Now the real question: is Ed's immune system bonkers because they're a D, or is it because they're vaccinated?

It was my birthday yesterday but more importantly Y'ALL SEE GEAR 5?!!?!!!?? AAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHAHAHAHAHHAAHAHAHHA I CAN'T WAIT FOR THE REST OF THE FIGHT BRO THE ANIMATION WAS SO BEAUTIFUL AND IT WAS SO GODDAMN FUNNY HE'S JUST SO GOOFY

Chapter 30: Chapter Thirty: Cheeks Of A Cheshire Grin

Chapter Summary

> *L.V.S (Your Lady Waits) - Shayfer James*
>
> I grab onto her arm as she passes me. “Before you go, I’d like to make a deal,” I say with a sly smile. She regards me curiously. I keep going. “I make bets. Mostly with one green haired idiot and a notable whale, but I feel like it’s a good time.”

Chapter Notes

> This song is about Luffy I don't make the rules. Remember that time I said there would be more Shayfer James?
>
> I got a new laptop and bro the switch from Mac to PC is fucking me up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “Doctorine! It’s an emergency!” Chopper screams, skidding into the room in his reindeer form. “Wapol is back!”
>
> Doctorine heaves a sigh, “...of course he is.” She takes a swig of her wine and gets to her feet. “You stay here and keep resting,” she orders me.
>
> I grab onto her arm as she passes me. “Before you go, I’d like to make a deal,” I say with a sly smile. She regards me curiously. I keep going. “I make bets. Mostly with one green haired idiot and a notable whale, but I feel like it’s a good time.”
>
> “It’s not a good time! Wapol is going to try and take the castle!” Chopper wails.
>
> “How about this then, my Captain will drive your problem away. This treatment includes broken bones, broken spirit, and a complete removal of your issue,” I smirk.

“And what would the exchange be? You called it a bet,” Doctorine asks, narrowed eyes focused on me.

I snicker. “Exchange? My Captain will take care of this Wapol fella, you won't even have to ask him to do it. I bet the cost of our medical treatment on it.”

Doctorine’s eyes widen as a surprised smile slides across her wrinkled face. “...You really are too clever for your own good. You have a deal, Detective Domino.” Then she spins on her heel and marches out. Chopper gives me a weird look before running out the door after her.

I snicker again and snuggle back under the covers and wait.

It doesn’t take long before Luffy comes crashing into the room. “It’s coooold! Jacket jacket jacket!” he mutters, rooting through piles of crap around the room. “Have you seen my jacket? It’s super cold out there!”

I shrug, pulling my blanket over my shoulders. “I dunno. I barely remember having a jacket myself.” He groans, then runs to the other side of the room to look. “You fighting that Wapol guy they were yelling about?” I ask.

“Yeah. It’s fine, you can just chill out here,” he responds.

I spot a jacket I vaguely remember as mine, a green thing with a fur collar and yellow flowers smattered across it, hanging off the end of the bed. “Luf, doll, mine’s right there. Just take that,” I say, pointing it out.

He snags it off the rail and shrugs it on. “It’s kinda boring, but if it’s warm it’s fine! I’m gonna go beat those people up now.” Then he runs out and slams the door behind him.

“Don’t ruin my jacket! I like it!” I holler after him, then bury myself back under the covers. I’m never going to see that jacket again.

_____

I ignore all of the cannon fire and rumbling of the castle, right up until I hear screaming come from inside. I groan and roll out of the bed, blanket still wrapped around my shoulders, snagging my pistol belt off the end of the bed and securing it.

I shuffle out the door to see Wapol’s stupid ass staring right at me. We stare at each other for a second. I blink. He blinks.

“Hi,” I mumble. He starts laughing. I sigh and subtly pull my pistol out of its holster, the movement hidden under the thick blanket I tie in a knot at the front.

“You must be another of the Strawhats,” he says with a grin.

I throw my head back and groan. “Alright, fuckbucket, I’m still very tired and I want to take a long ass nap. So hows about we make this quick, yeah?”

He grins up at me. “A cocky one, are you? I say we take our time.” Then he lunges at the pillar beside me and starts climbing.

I brandish my pistol from under my blanket and point it. “Thanks for being an easy target,” I snark, then pull the trigger.

Nothing happens.

I blink. I blink again.

“Oh *fuck!”*

I NEVER RELOADED IT AFTER LITTLE GARDEN OH MY GOD—

Wapol lands on the balcony and doesn’t waste a second before running at me. I release a scream and start tearing ass away from him.

“As king of this country I demand you stop!” he hollers.

“I don’t subscribe to monarchies!” I scream back.

I trip on a hole in the middle of the walkway, tumbling down the staircase they put in the worst place imaginable, with another scream.

“WHO DESIGNED THIS PLACE?!”

Thankfully, I see after I land on my feet and take a glance behind, Wapol got stuck in the hole because of his round stature.

He yells some random bullshit I ignore in favour of continuing to run. There’s some weird crunching noises behind me, then the heavy clink of metal on stone. “NOPE NOPE NOPE!” I yell, not bothering to turn around.

I make a break for the door. I’m *not* fighting this wackjob without my gun. All my hopes for a clean escape are dashed by a weight bearing down on me from above. My chin smashes off the floor and we skid a good three feet before coming to a stop.

“I’m going to eat you first!” Wapol cackles.

“Eat my *ass* loser!” I scream into the snow.

“I found you!” Luffy’s voice screams. The weight on top of me abruptly leaves as Luffy’s leg stretches above me.

“Thank you!” I groan into the ground.

“Why’s that guy skinny now?” he asks, trotting up to me as I get to my feet.

I look over my jacket, still whole on his body. “...You scuffed up my sleeves.”

His face droops. “I’m sorry. I tried really hard not to. But! I didn’t rip them off!”

I raise an eyebrow. “Was that on the table?”

He just scratches the back of his head and whistles.

“Hello? I’m still here!” Wapol yells from the other side of the room, where he’s dislodged himself from the wall.

“Can it, canboy! I’m having a conversation!” I yell back.

He makes an indignant face. “...Behind me is the weapons vault! I have the only key to it!” he yells, slightly more perturbed. Oh right, the key. Shit, if Nami was here she would have taken it.

I bend down and grab a handful of snow. Wapol keeps going on and on while I pack it into a tight ball. Years and years of Canadian winters have prepared me for this moment…

I turn to see him holding the key up in the air by two fingers, clearly flaunting it. “Wapol!” I yell, getting into stance.

“Hm?”

“You’re looking at a previous snowball fight champion. Eat this!” And I hurl my snowball with the accuracy befitting my hard won title.

The key flies out of his hand. My snowball explodes into powder that sprays across his shocked face. The key disappears amongst the other snow. He stares at me, mouth wide open. I grin.

“That was pretty cool, Ed!” Luffy laughs.

I smirk at him. “I know.” There’s a long moment of silence. Wapol continues to stare. “...Is he ok?” I mumble.

“This isn’t over!” he blurts, darting around the corner.

“He’s getting away! Come back here!” Luffy hollers, giving chase.

I stare after them for a moment, then sigh. “Not my problem anymore.”

Then Sanji claws his way across the ground toward me like a madman. “Ed, my love! Thank the heavens you’re safe!” he cries.

I wave down at him. “Hi. What happened to your back? Nevermind. Hey, while you’re down there, you wanna help me look for this key? I sniped it out of canmans hand but I don’t know where it fell,” I say, getting on my knees to dig through the snow.

“Whatever you want!” he sings, swiping his arms along the floor. After a solid five minutes of searching, with the song of cannon fire and screaming as our background music, I finally manage to retrieve the key.

“Do you know how much longer she’s going to try and keep you here?” Sanji whispers to me as the fighting concludes outside. We’re both crouched behind the spiral staircase.

I shrug. “She said under two days, but I want us to hit the road asap. I’ll finagle it as soon as you get your spine checked out.”

He waves a hand, taking a pull from his cigarette. “You don’t have to worry about me, I’ll be fine.”

I raise an unimpressed eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

“Oh no you won’t!” Doctorine’s voice yells from the other side of the wall. The stonework above us explodes. We hit the ground screaming. “Get back to the medical ward now!” she bellows.

“YES DOCTOR, SORRY DOCTOR!” we both cry, scrambling to our feet.

_____

I’m tucked back into bed when Doctorine comes back in from the room Sanji was screaming from. She takes a big swig of her wine. “Hey Dalton, you seen the key to the weapons vault?”

The man in question, who is laid out in the other bed in the room, looks at her in confusion. “I assume it flew away with Wapol. Why? Do you need it?” he asks.

She turns away from him. “None of your business. That’s really too bad…”

I shuffle upright in the bed, a smirk stretching my face. “Doctorine, a question if you will.”

She looks at me with a small hint of trepidation. “Yes?”

I twirl my purloined key between my fingers. “We had discussed earlier the payment for my crew's first round of treatment. I assume that debt has been paid in full?”

She gives me a keen look and a knowing smile. “It has.”

“However this second round, Sanji’s extra injuries and whatnot, is still up in the air?”

She throws her head back and cackles. “Too clever! Too clever by far!”

I grin and toss her the key. “Consider us even. And I wouldn't *dare* suggest a woman like you speed up my recovery timeline, but I wouldn't mind your Transponder number.”

She lets out another cackle, tugging her cropped jacket on and spinning the key around one finger. “Oh, I’d never! I’ll be leaving you alone here while I take care of something downstairs. I’ll be leaving the door open, and there's coats in that closet right there. Your boy is completely healed by now, too. And my number may or may not be written on that notepad over there.”

She turns and points at me. “Don’t you dare run away!” Then she spins on her heel and strides out of the room, calling over her shoulder, “the rest of you follow me. I need your help!”

The remaining men file out of the room after her, bewildered looks tossed back at me. I snicker under my breath and get to my feet. I tear the sheet of note paper and tuck it into my pants pockets, giving an unimpressed Dalton a wink.

“You *did* hear what she said, yes?” he asks me.

I raise my eyebrow at him. “I did, clearly you didn’t.” He frowns at me. I sigh. “Dalton, yeah? I don’t know if you just got conked on the head too hard during your fight, but that was something where I’m from we call subtlety and wordplay.”

He frowns harder at me. “You’re not very nice.”

I smirk down at him. “No, I’m not.”

Out of the closet I steal a big warm looking grey plaid jacket, way too big for Doctorine (I briefly wonder who it could have belonged to), and start the process of untying Sanji from the operating table he’s strapped into.

Goddamn, Doctorine, way to make it look like a torture chamber. Or a BDSM sex dungeon.

Sanji doesn’t stir through the entire process of me dressing him, which may be a good thing in retrospect because I do *not* want to be the one to mop up his nosebleed before we skedaddle.

I toss Sanji over my shoulder and saunter out of the room, a cheeky thumbs up tossed at Dalton before I disappear down the corridor.

How the hell do I manage to carry his delirious ass when I’ve been sick for the past few days? I dunno either.

I trot my happy ass outside into the cold to see Nami and Vivi having a conversation beside Usopp who’s making a snowman, Zoro who’s watching Luffy who’s staring at Chopper, and Chopper standing in front of the trees.

“Hi Chopper!” I call, jaunting up to my crew and tossing Sanji to the ground to hug Nami. She wraps her arms around me tight and sighs warm breath into my ear. Chopper doesn’t acknowledge me.

“You’re gonna come be a pirate, right?!” Luffy cheers, pumping his arms in the air.

“It’s not possible,” Chopper mutters.

“Sure it is! Being a pirate is super fun!” Luffy responds, bouncing in place from excitement.

“I can't… I’m a reindeer! I’ve got hooves and antlers! And my nose is blue!” he shouts, furry face scrunched up. “Maybe I do want to be a pirate… but I’m not human! I’m a monster! I can’t be friends with humans! So I only came here to thank you!” His face falls. “I… I really appreciate you asking… but I can’t…” He visibly hesitates. “I’m going to stay here… But if you want it come and visit—”

“Shut up and come with us!” Luffy hollers, wide grin on his face as he throws his arms and head back. All of us are helpless against the smiles our Captain wrings from us.

Chopper tears up. “OK!!”

———

“Ed, are you actually ok now?” Usopp asks me once Chopper runs off to get his things.

“Oh I’m ace, apparently I’ve got a super strong immune system so I was fighting that shit off like a boss,” I answer, making fake punching motions. “Allegedly I have, and I quote, ‘fucktones of antibodies for a fucktone of shit,’ whatever that means.”

Usopp heaves a sigh. “Of course you do, you ridiculous beast.”

I shoot him a look. “I’m not gonna ask what that means if you take it back right now.”

He hides behind his snowman. “I didn’t say anything!” Luffy pushes Usopp into the snowman with a laugh. Usopp spits out a mouthful of snow with a dead expression. We all gracefully ignore the two of them.

“You’re super sure you’re fine though?” Nami questions, slapping her hand on my forehead. “And why isn’t your jacket zipped up?”

I bat her hand away. “Yes I am *fine.* And zipped coats are for losers who didn’t grow up with this kind of shit weather.”

Luffy laughs again, lifting his hands from where he was smothering a red faced Usopp in the remains of their snowman. “Yeah! Ed’s a snowball fight champion! You shoulda seen them, it was so awesome!”

I smirk and put my hands on my hips. “Damn right! I totally saved the day. And I definitely didn’t have to resort to snowballs because my gun wasn’t loaded. Nope, not me, never.” I’m showered in doubtful looks that make me deflate.

“You’re from a winter island? I thought you were from the East Blue,” Usopp pipes up.

Nami makes some incredibly unsubtle ‘cut it out’ gestures at him that I roll my eyes at. “I’m not East Blue native, no. It’s a little more… complicated than that.”

I’m not explaining this shit, I gotta leave a little bit of mystery. Not to mention the havoc the truth would wreak on this world. Being as vague as I can is probably the best way to keep us all safe.

“It’s not our business. Ed’s better so we don’t have to worry about stalling anymore,” Zoro grunts from his snow bench.

I slide over to him while batting my eyelashes. “Oh Zoro, were you worried about lil old me?”

He glares and shoves a handful of snow at me. “Shut up!” he yells. I spit it out and grab two handfuls to shove down his (also stolen) jacket. “You little fucker!” he squawks, tackling me to the ground. I don’t stop cackling for a second as we roll around in the snow. “You’re such a shit! You spent this whole trip delirious and you *still* managed to predict the whole damn thing!” he screams into my ear.

Tears stream down my face from how hard I’m laughing. “20,000 berri! You owe me 20,000 berri!” I wheeze helplessly.

“YOU OWE THEM *HOW MUCH?!”* Nami screeches.

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT THEY’RE A DAMN PSYCHIC!” Zoro screams back.

I just keep crying and laughing.

It takes a second for the three of us to chill to a normal degree. Nami goes back to standing with Vivi, and Usopp starts rolling another snowball. Zoro plops back down on his snow bench, still grumbling under his breath.

I shake the snow from my hair and sit down on top of him. He shoots me the stink eye but I guess he still pities how sick I got, because he lets me stay. I throw an arm over his shoulder and he wraps one around my waist.

“Speaking of berri, did the doctor demand any kind of payment?” Nami asks, encroaching horror clear in her tone.

I laugh. “You don’t have to shell out a single berri, I promise. I haggled free treatment for everyone who got hurt, in addition to a boon of my own.”

“Do I want to know what your ‘boon’ is?” she groans.

I wiggle my eyebrows. “A MILF’s a number.”

Zoro points an accusatory finger at Nami. “I’m not asking what that word means and neither are you.” I snicker.

“How exactly did you haggle your way out of paying for top class medical treatment?” Usopp questions.

I shrug. “A bet, a key, and a chocolate bar. My only chocolate bar actually, I’ve been saving it since Loguetown but it wasn’t dark chocolate so I figured it was ok to let it go, and Chopper is just too cute—”

“Stop! Stop, you're crazy. Actually straight up bonkers. No wonder you and Luffy get along so well,” Usopp snarks.

I point an accusing finger at him “You’re being way too mean to me today. I almost died if you don’t remember.” Nami smothers a groan in her hands. Even Vivi, who’s been abnormally quiet, snickers under her breath.

“You’re both goddamn idiots! End of discussion!” Zoro barks, using the arm he has around my waist to smack me in the side. I shoot a playful glare at Usopp that he returns by sticking his tongue out and pulling down his eyelid. I roll my eyes. Luffy shoves Usopp’s head through his newly constructed snowman.

“We should all get ready for a swift exit, by the way,” I mention.

Nami raises an eyebrow. “Why?”

I brush some snow out of Zoro’s hair. His stupid ass looks like a Christmas tree. “Because Doctorine is a lot like Zeff in a couple of ways. Namely their first reaction to getting their kid to leave. With a bang.”

They all shoot me confused looks that remind me none of them were on the Baratie at that time. Luffy starts laughing louder though. “This will be fun then!”

Nami sends us apprehensive looks. “Is this going to end with screaming or bodily injury..?” I make a so-so gesture.

On that cue Chopper comes screaming out of the castle, full reindeer form pulling along a sleigh like it’s Christmas fucking night. “What the hell is that?!” Zoro squawks.

“GET ON THE SLEIGH! WE’RE GOING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN!” Chopper screams.

Then angry Doctorine, hurling all kinds of knives and other horrific weapons, comes into view. Everyone starts screaming. I grab on tight to Zoro’s pilfered jacked, also screaming. Everyone jumps up to get on the sleigh.

Zoro doesn’t even bother pushing me off, he just picks me up princess style and *throws me.* I land hard in the bed of the sleigh. “YOU MOTHERFUCKER!” I curse, hand on my poor lower back.

We zoom towards the edge of the cliff.

Luffy lands next to me in the bottom of the sleigh, shoving his scuffed cheek against mine with a loud laugh. Vivi and Nami cling to each other as we pick up speed. Sanji is propped up

on a seat by Usopp, who is holding the side of the sleigh so hard it may splinter. Zoro stares forward with a healthy dose of fear.

Chopper clears the entrance to the tram. We go flying down the rope.

I stare up at the moon. Albedo masks the sky in a hazy grey, and I can't help the tear that slips out of my eye unbidden.

This really is making me miss home.

Luffy rubs his cheek against mine, wet and smooth where my tear fell. I look at him. He looks back, that familiar fond but sad look keen in his eyes.

But I think this is better.

I grin and throw my hands above my head. My Captain's eyes flash and he does the same beside me.

"WOOOOOOOO!"

We slam onto solid snow and careen past a gaggle of people at the base of the giant tree the rope was moored to. "That was awesome! Let's do it again!" Luffy cheers.

"I thought I was gonna die…" Usopp whimpers.

Sanji finally wakes up on the bench behind us. "Wa's goin' on?!" he mumbles, startling upright.

“Just keep your eyes up,” I state, staring up at the white snow with a wide genuine smile, an arm hooked around my Captain.

Cannon fire sounds behind us. The sky lights up pink.

We skid to a stop as Chopper shrinks and runs past us, pure disbelief etched on his face. Pink snowfall like cherry blossoms falls around us. I smile and pull Luffy closer.

Chopper throws his head back and wails.

Chapter End Notes

Ed isn't a middle child but has middle child tendencies because *I'm* a middle child and I write them like they are too.

The family dynamic is just ruthlessly bullying each other to show they care <3

Chapter 31: Chapter Thirty One: Nobody Loves Me Like You Love Me

Chapter Summary

Hold Each Other - A Great Big World

The… for lack of a better word I'm going to call it party, but know that I use that word loosely, is kicked into full gear in an unreasonably short amount of time. Drinks are passed around, and Sanji somehow manages to cook a full course meal while I have my back turned.

Chapter Notes

Dude I though this chapter was short but as I was setting it up I realized it was way over 4k?? Idk how that happened???? Either way I guess that's my standard now lmao.

Gear 5 just keeps getting better, a couple of my favourite moments of the fight were in this weeks episode T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I watch the pink snowflakes melt on the water from beside a quiet Chopper as we sail away from Drum Island. The boys are being rambunctious little fucks behind us, but I keep my eyes level.

I absentmindedly rub at my sternum while Vivi cries into Karoo's frozen feathers. We literally had to fish his goofy ass out of the river while we were leaving. "What were you doing in the water?!" she wails hysterically.

Karoo starts babbling while Zoro laughs nervously. "He probably just slipped and fell in the river like an idiot."

"Shut up!" Vivi snaps. Karoo continues to babble.

“He said he saw Zoro slip and fall in the river after grumbling about not being able to go in. He jumped in to save him, but instead he froze,” Chopper pipes up from beside me.

I fold at the waist and start laughing hysterically. “You! You fucking *fell!* You goddamn idiot I told you — hey don’t you daRE—”

I’m cut off by Zoro furiously grabbing me in a headlock. “Shut up! Shut your damn mouth you intolerable jackass!” he squawks, hauling me to the ground in a wrestling move that sends my stomach heaving.

I keep laughing through the wheezing breath. “Um — maybe you should… not do that?” Chopper hesitantly mumbles somewhere to my left.

“Listen to him! Listen to the reindeer!” I wheeze, hands blindly smacking at Zoro. He releases me and I sprawl across the deck. I heave in a breath and glare at Zoro as he sits his annoying ass on the deck beside me, a triumphant smirk etched on his face. “You still fell in a freezing river. 6,000 berri,” I wheeze.

His smirk drops into a scowl as Luffy starts laughing, having pulled chopsticks out of his nose to shove them at Usopp. My hand comes up to rub at my sternum once more. “Ed, do you have asthma?” Chopper asks, dropping into a crouch beside my head.

I shrug, breath still coming shallow. “Dunno. The cold is making it a little hard to breathe, but it hasn’t been making a significant impact. Figured it wasn’t a problem.” I give him concerned eyes. “Is it a problem?!”

He shakes his head. “It’s probably nothing serious, the cold weather and your recent sickness may just be causing inflammation in your lungs. I can give you a more thorough check later if you’re interested, but Doctorine and I saw nothing wrong up in the castle.”

I frown. “Well if you both didn’t see anything it can’t be that serious. You are both very good at what you do.”

He gives me a somewhat cheeky grin. “I think she liked you, even after you called her a hot old lady while you were passed out.”

My eyes bug out. “I did *WHAT?!”*

He giggles, a hoof coming up to cover his mouth. “It was funny! I don’t think I’ve ever seen Doctorine laugh so much during a procedure!”

I groan into my hands. “I am so fucking dumb…”

“Why do you know so many smart people words?” Luffy asks, coming over to crouch by my head as well.

I roll my eyes and try to forget my embarrassment. “Chopper’s a doctor. A damn good one at that.”

Chopper turns red and starts doing his stupid little dance again. “Damnit, that doesn't make me happy you know!”

“...WAIT HE’S A DOCTOR?!” the boys yell.

I stare blankly upward. “Sometimes I manage to forget how hopelessly stupid you all are.”

“You didn’t know? Just why did you ask him to join us then?” Nami asks Luffy incredulously.

“He’s a talking transforming reindeer monster,” Luffy states as if it's self explanatory. It kind of is.

“Emergency food,” Sanji answers.

Usopp raises an eyebrow at Nami. “How exactly did *you* know he was a doctor?”

She hoists a bag with Choppers white X on it. “I found this in the sled. I figured it was his,” she replies, self satisfied smile on her face. She gives me a sidelong smirk. “I can do detective work too.”

I snort, rolling up to sit criss-cross applesauce. “Your mom’s something else, Chopper.”

Chopper himself barely acknowledges my words, he’s too busy staring down at his bag with something like surprised affection in his wide eyes.

Luffy has somehow gotten ahold of multiple pairs of chopsticks, and has managed to convince Usopp to shove them up his nose. “You guys are idiots,” Nami groans, turning to Chopper for some sense of maturity.

She’s very disappointed when she sees he also has put the chopsticks in his nose.

The… for lack of a better word I’m going to call it party, but know that I use that word loosely, is kicked into full gear in an unreasonably short amount of time. Drinks are passed around, and Sanji somehow manages to cook a full course meal while I have my back turned.

Zoro shoves a drink into my hand and I eye him dubiously. He rolls his eyes at me. “It’s not the same shit you drank back in East Blue. I promise this doesn’t taste as bad.”

I sniff the drink apprehensively. The faint smell of strawberry greets my nose. “Is… Is this strawberry flavoured vodka?” I murmur.

He shrugs. “Dunno. You like fruit, right? I have literally no idea where we got this, but it tasted fine to me.”

I eye him over the rim of my cup. “You would drink straight rubbing alcohol and say it’s good.”

He squints at me. “It was one time, and I was in a bad mood. I didn’t do it again.”

I sigh, long and exasperated. The hell did I do to get saddled with such an idiot?

I take a tentative sip of the drink. It tastes like strawberry and alcohol. Suffice to say, it makes my face scrunch up and my nose tingle. “It’s not bad, but I really don’t like the taste of alcohol. I think I’d prefer just regular juice,” I admit.

He sighs and takes the cup from me. “More for me I guess.” Then he points at me with an undeserved amount of seriousness. “But know this. I will find a drink you like or die trying. I promise.”

I point back at him accusingly. “Know forever in your heart you just encouraged underage drinking. Live with this burden.”

He gives me a confused stare. “Underaged? Aren’t you eighteen?” I nod, also giving him a confused stare.

“What’s the legal drinking age where you're from?” we both ask at the same time.

“Nineteen. Not that people where I’m from really listen to that, I knew kids who got alcohol poisoning at the age of fourteen,” I answer.

Zoro raises an eyebrow. “Nineteen? That’s weird. We don’t really have a strict drinking age in the East Blue, it’s like a soft sixteen. As long as you aren’t… getting alcohol poisoning at

fourteen, you're free to indulge as you please."

I hum. "Huh. interesting."

Zoro is quickly dragged into a fight with Sanji after that. I scoot backwards until I hit the bannister beside Chopper, who still has chopsticks in his nose. "You having fun?" I ask, amused.

He stares at the ruckus with a strange expression. "I…"

His thought is interrupted by Usopp. "Let's have a toast for our new friend!" he hollers, hoisting his cup high and shoving two over at me and Chopper.

Chopper looks down into his glass. Then he looks up at me with a delighted grin. "This is the happiest I've ever been!"

My heart melts in my chest. I grab Chopper in one arm and raise my glass with the other. "To Chopper!" I holler. All my crewmates join me in the toast, cups lifted to the pink snowing sky and wide smiles fixed firmly in place.

"YAHOOO!"

———

"Hey Ed?" Luffy murmurs into my shoulder that night, tucked away in the boys cabin couch with the drone of snoring around us, everyone tuckered out from a night of partying.

I hum sleepily into his hair.

“I’m glad you’re ok,” he says quietly. His voice sounds raw.

I pull him closer and sigh contently into his head. “I told you I’d be fine. You literally can’t get rid of me at this point,” I mumble.

He breathes out a laugh. “Ok, good.” He presses a clumsy kiss into my skin and snuggles in closer, humming something quietly as I drift off into sleep.

_____

“Ed, you work out in the mornings, right?” Zoro asks me while I’m getting a glass of water from the galley the next day.

I raise an eyebrow at him over my shoulder. “A little, why?”

He thumbs the hilt of his sword where he’s leaning by the door. “We’re going to work out together,” he states.

I whip my head around to him. “Uh, what? Dude, your workout routine would *kill me.* I’ve seen the shit you lift, I would actually fucking die.”

He huffs, arms crossed. “What’s going to kill you is not getting stronger. Just look at what happened on Little Garden.”

I frown at him. “I did good on Little Garden.”

He continues unperturbed. “You got caught without the means to defend yourself, and you would have gotten killed if we hadn’t intervened. And then you got sick and almost died anyway.”

I frown harder. I guess he does make a good point…

Wait a second—

“Hold up, Zoro, are you saying the reason I got sick was because I’m *weak?”* I ask incredulously. He gets this look on his face like he doesn’t like the way I said it but can’t disagree.

I sigh, setting down my glass to fully turn to him. “Look, I can agree that the way I fight put me in a tough spot back there. But I still would have gotten bit if I had bigger biceps. That is the one thing me being stronger wouldn’t have fixed.” He opens his mouth to argue but I beat him to the punch. “I’m not saying I don’t want to get stronger, or that we can’t be workout buddies. You make a solid point. But goddamnit Zoro, what would I have done? Punch the illness outta myself?”

He scrunches his nose. “...Maybe. I don’t know! You looked ready to kick the bucket any second though!” he snaps defensively.

I scowl at him. “But I didn’t, because I have a kickass immune system!”

“But you could have!” he rebuffs, pushing off the wall to take a step towards me.

I take a step forward as well. “But I *didn’t!* Why are you getting so worked up?!”

His expression crunches up. “Damnit Ed, what would we have done if you died?! Especially to something so *stupid!”* My retort dies on my lips. Zoro stalks forward the last few paces to be nose to nose with me. “You’re the First Mate. That means you aren’t allowed to die because you aren’t up to snuff.”

I stare up into his intense eyes for a moment before looking away. “...You’re the one who said it didn’t take strength to be a good First Mate,” I say quietly.

Zoro hesitates before his expression turns firm. “That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t still work to be as strong as you can be.”

I frown down at my feet. “...I know. But you gave me advice and I took it. Strength isn’t my only weapon. I can agree that I won’t always measure up as First Mate in terms of raw power, but you know that isn’t my style.” I glance up at him then back down. “I plan and I play different angles. I find weak points. That’s what I’m good at. I’m a tactician before a fighter, and I don’t see that changing.” I heave a sigh and gently punch him in the chest. “Again, I don’t think you’re wrong,” I mumble, “but… I’m never gonna be a frontline fighter like you Sanji and Luffy. I’m just… not built for that.”

He looks down at me and sighs. “That excuse isn’t going to hold up forever, but fine. We can just do like… pushups. Or something.”

“Sounds good, just don’t kill me before Alabasta does,” I smirk, pulling my fist back and holding it up. He gives me a good natured eyeroll and bumps his own against mine. Then a ladle comes flying in from out of nowhere and smacks him on the head.

“Get the fuck out of my kitchen you ogre!” Sanji hollers, chucking a wooden spoon at him.

Zoro ducks, grabbing the spoon out of the air and hurling it back. “What did you call me?!”

I saunter out of the galley as their fighting intensifies, shutting the door behind me. “Aw wait shit I forgot my water—”

———

“Vivi, if I don’t learn how this cannon works *now* I am going to blow a hole through the ship.”

I slam the cannon case on the deck in front of where Vivi was reclining on Karoo. She jolts and looks up at me surprised. “The cannon..? I mean I guess?” she says hesitantly.

I grin down at her. “You promised to teach me, so teach!”

She slowly sits up, unclicking the clasps on the case. “It’s not a terribly complicated weapon, you won’t have to reload the gunpowder unless you’re hoping for a supercharged shot. There’s rounds in this compartment right here,” she flips open an additional compartment in the case that I hadn't noticed earlier, there’s a total of ten small cannonballs packed in there and she takes one out. “You just have to load the shot in here,” she slides it down the front of the barrel, “and flip this lever right here.” She clicks something beside the trigger and passes the cannon to me. “Don’t point it at anyone unless you want them blown overboard. The crosshairs are a little weird, so I’d suggest aiming slightly higher than you want to hit.”

I stare down at the cannon with starry eyed reverence. I hoist it up on my shoulder and point it across the deck at where Zoro is eating a sandwich. “Hey, Listerine!” I call. Then I shoot.

He looks up confused just in time to duck out of the way of the cannon ball. It splashes into the water and sprays a healthy dose of seawater at a bewildered Zoro. “What the fuck was that?!” he squawks.

I shrug. “Testing my aim? You were such a bitch about me getting a cannon I figured you’d want to see it in action.”

He glares at me and draws one of his swords. “I will kick your ass, you motherfucker—”

I load a second cannonball, flip the switch, and fire it at his head. He lunges forward under the projectile and takes a swing at my own head with the flat of his blade. I squeal, toss the cannon at Vivi and go running up the stairs.

I barely make it up to the second deck before a blade lodges in the wall beside my head. “Did you just throw your sword like a javelin?!” I screech, booking it across the deck.

“Yes! Come here you little shit!” he yells back.

The door beside me swings open and Sanji tosses Luffy out of it, right in my path. I scream, smacking right into him and sending both of us rolling. Luffy, the idiot, starts laughing. “What are we doing?”

“Trying not to die!” I yell back, trying to slow us down before we smack into the railing.

“You green turd, what the hell are you doing to Ed?!” Sanji screams behind me.

The good news is we don’t smack into the railing, the bad news is we fall right over it into the water.

We splash through the surface and I hook an arm around the suddenly limp Luffy. I kick us both to the surface and spit out a mouthful of seawater. I glare up at Zoro and Sanji, who are ignoring us and fighting on the deck.

“Get me a fucking rope you assholes! The ship is *actively moving!”* I yell. The sounds of fighting continue while I furiously paddle alongside the boat. I’m smacked in the face by a life preserver and dunk back under for a second.

I thread Luffy through the floating loop and glare up at an apologetic Vivi who’s flanked by an angry Nami. “What the hell were you doing?!” she screams, shaking her fist at all of us.

The boys stop fighting to look down at me in the water. “Oops.”

Nami smacks both of them in the head and hands them the rope our preserver is attached to. “Pull them up!” she orders.

“Yeah!” I agree from far below.

She turns her glare on me. “I saw what you did! You’re at fault too!”

I smile sheepishly as we’re slowly pulled back up to the ship. Luffy rolls on the deck and shakes around like a worm or a wet dog. I vigorously shake my head and wring my shirt out.

Nami points accusing fingers at all of us. “Luffy, stop sneaking into the kitchen. Sanji and Zoro, stop fighting! And Ed, no more firing your fucking bazooka at people who aren't trying to kill us!”

We all nod our heads. “Yes Nami, sorry Nami,” we say in unison.

_____

I’m in the galley sipping some black tea with Sanji and looking at the newspaper's comic strips (which are all Marine propaganda, by the way) a few days later when the yelling starts outside. I groan into my cup and rub my eyes.

After literally having to tie Luffy to the bed for the last few nights to stop him from eating our entire food stores while we sleep, I am fucking exhausted.

“I got it. You stay here,” I grumble to Sanji, who gives me a thumbs up and continues to saute his vegetables.

I stroll out the door just in time to watch Bon Clay sucker punch Luffy across the face.

I stare with the most flat expression I’ve used in days. Bon Clay, now with Luffy’s face, starts parading around the deck while laughing maniacally. I watch his little show with vague amusement for a couple minutes while he switches through everybody.

I snort loudly when the boys get up and start dancing with him. Bon Clay pauses his antics to turn his attention at me. I stare back. There's a tense moment of silence across the ship.

I lift my hand and make the limp wrist motion, his eyes light up and he does it back.

The vibe switches in a second. We both drop into couches and point at each other with big grins on our faces and start squealing.

I vault the rail to leap at him, a loud laugh bursting out of my mouth. Bon Clay catches me and starts spinning around with me hoisted up like a cat. We're both just making weird screeching noises and nonsensical babbles.

"What is happening? Ed, do you know this guy?" Nami asks, incredulity and morbid fascination plain in her expression.

"Hand wavy gender recognizes hand wavy gender," I answer, both of us flapping our hands. "I've never fucking met 'em!"

"Even so! It's always a pleasure to meet fellow queers on the sea! No joke!" Bon Clay sings, striking a pose that makes his pink Okama Way robe sway about him.

"Especially one as lovely as you!" I reply, batting my eyelashes.

He throws his head back and laughs. "Oh you're just too much! Stop, you'll make me blush!" It's my turn to laugh.

"Hey, is that ship headed this way yours?" Nami suddenly asks, pointing at a pink sailed ship swiftly making its way towards us.

"Oh my, is it time to leave already? What a shame," Bon Clay sighs, jumping up onto the rail and landing en pointe. The boys make disappointed sounds behind me, Usopp actually

tearing up. “Don’t be sad, all journeys must include a farewell! Still I shall never forget this. Length of time means nothing to true friendship!” Bon Clay cries, a thumbs up thrown over his shoulder at us and a tear in his eye.

“We’ll see you again!” the boys scream.

“Goodbye darling!” I yell, waving vigorously at him as he leaps onto his ship as it passes us.

“Let’s be going!” Bon Clay yells to his crew.

“Yes sir! Mr. 2, Bon Clay sir!” his crew yells back. Then they're sailing away.

My own crew's jaws drop around me.

“Mr. 2?!” Vivi spins around to me with absolute horror written on her face. “Didn’t you have pictures of all the Baroque Works agents?! How did you not recognize him?!”

I shrug. “I did.”

Somehow all of their jaws drop further.

“WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY ANYTHING?!” they all yell.

I shrug again. “Gay solidarity?”

Nami falls to her knees and Usopp bursts into tears. “Why are you like this?” he whimpers into his hands.

“You could have put us all in danger! He has our faces now!” Vivi screeches.

I wave my hand. “He seems like a nice guy, besides! We can make countermeasures for this!”

Vivi clutches at her hair. “He had my *fathers* face!”

Nami crosses her arms. “He’s a very dangerous enemy to have, if that’s the case. Even just having our faces… We may not even be able to trust each other.”

“Really?” Luffy questions, head tilted like a puppy.

Zoro puts a hand on both his and my shoulders. “I don’t think it’ll be a problem. I think it’s a good thing we met him when we did. Ed has a point, now we can use countermeasures.”

That train of thought is interrupted as the sea starts to bulge beside our ship. A gigantic Sea Cat rises from the water to tower over us. “WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!” Usopp screams, him and Chopper flailing around together.

Luffy starts winding his fist up while Zoro takes out his swords. “MEAT! THAT THING IS MEAT!”

“KILL IT OR I’LL KILL YOU!” Sanji hollers, running out of the galley. I sigh, rubbing my eyes. Even though I stopped Luffy from eating all our food, that dumb bitch is always going to be himself.

“You can’t eat that!” Vivi snaps, smacking all three of them on the head. “Sea Cats are sacred creatures in Alabasta!”

The Sea Cat takes that as its opportunity to sink below the waves, a fearful glance tossed at our crew as it does.

“Why is the sea so scary…” Usopp whimpers.

“It’s sure full of a lot of things!” Chopper says enthusiastically.

“Including a menagerie of Baroque Works ships,” I add, staring at the slowly approaching platoon of them behind us.

“Guess that’s proof we’re closing in on Alabasta,” Zoro states.

“The wind and weather is stabilizing, so we’ve entered Alabasta’s climate area,” Nami announces.

“Those must be the Billions converging on Alabasta…” Vivi mumbles.

“We should just blow them up right now!” Usopp cries.

“No! It would be faster to just go over and beat them all up! No wait, I need to eat first!” Luffy cuts in.

“Stop worrying. They’re nothing,” Zoro scoffs.

“Yeah. We need to keep our eyes on the prize or we might lose. Nine against two hundred sucks,” Sanji adds with a smirk.

After a marker and a roll of bandages are passed around the group we all give each other solemn nods. “I’d like to propose a verbal password as well. Never a bad idea to have a backup, and it would probably be faster than unwrapping these,” I pipe up.

There's nods from a few people. “That’s smart. What would the password be though?” Nami asks.

I close my eyes and nod sagely. “Swordfish. It’s always swordfish.” I’m given flat looks all around.

“I like it! Swordfish is a type of food!” Luffy laughs.

I swing an arm around him with a smirk. “See, the Captain agrees with me! Swordfish it is!”

“Is this clone guy really that good?” Sanji asks, tightening his bandage with his teeth.

“He’s not just good, he’s an exact copy! You should have seen him! We even got to dance with him.” Usopp exclaims.

Sanji raises a dubious eyebrow. “Yeah… I’m not interested in a male ballerina,” he says, scoffing out a puff of smoke.

“Careful,” I say mildly.

He waves his cigarette at me. “Apologies.”

“Well with all the information Ed got us about the enemy, this won’t be nearly as tedious as it could have been,” Zoro states, tugging his own bandage into place. “We should go over the last few of them now so we don’t get blindsided again.” I nod in agreement.

Chopper looks up with a determined face. “What should I do?”

Usopp is the one that answers him. “Just do what you can, you don’t have to do anything more than that. And if a fight gets too hard, just run away.”

Sanji shakes his head. “You’re just saying that for yourself.”

I cross my arms and tilt my head back. “No, that’s pretty solid advice. We’re all going to have bad matchups among their ranks. As long as we keep Sanji away from the ladies it should work out fine, though.”

There’s a couple of snorts from the crew. “I can see the island!” Luffy cheers.

“We should dock in Nanohana and hide the ship,” Vivi suggests.

Luffy comes up on my left and puts his arm out. “Whatever happens from now on, this is proof of our friendship!” Me and the rest of the crew thrust our arms out as well. “Now let’s land! TO A RESTAURANT!” Luffy hollers. “Oh, and to Alabasta,”

I sigh and shove his hat further down his head. I half-assedly wave my arm through the air. We need a better cheer than that. “Let’s try not to die in the desert because that would suck!”

“That was worse than Luffy’s!”

Chapter End Notes

When in doubt make up drinking laws. I do what I want.

I promise we'll actually get to Alabasta next chapter and oh boy... this arc.....
Let's just say I hope y'all down with tension and that hurt/comfort shit.

Also the Critical Role references in this and the next chapter are very important to me, idc if you actually see or understand them.

Chapter 32: Chapter Thirty Two: Raise Some Hell Before We Ghost

Chapter Summary

Rebels - Call Me Karizma

I glare at him over my shoulder as we disembark. “First of all, I don’t do anything with grace so write that down.”

Chapter Notes

WE'RE FINALLY HERE! Buckle up fuckers, this arc is... yikes.

I have a severe and crippling weakness for cowboys. Just know that.

I am once again begging people to put funny shit in their bookmarks for this fic. Please I wanna read them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luffy has leapt off the ship before we’re even fully docked.

Nami throws her head back and groans. “After we get some disguises, you’re going after him!” she announces, pointing right at me.

“Hah? Why me?” I blink.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re the First Mate, you’re basically his keeper.”

I frown. “That feels like too much responsibility for one person.”

Zoro smacks me on the back with a smirk. “And yet you’ll handle it gracefully.”

I glare at him over my shoulder as we disembark. “First of all, I don’t do anything with grace so write that down.”

Vivi gasps from behind us. “Mr. 3’s ship is here!”

Usopp groans. “I thought that guy died?”

“Don’t worry about him. Crocodile is probably dealing with him personally. I mean, he did send Bon Clay to kill him after all,” I state, scuffing the toe of my boot in the sand. This is gonna be such a bitch to walk through… There’s some noises of shock from my companions. I turn back to them with a raised eyebrow. “Did… you guys not get that?”

Nami shoots me a look. “How would we have gotten that?”

“I thought you could do detective work too?” I snark. “But really, why the hell else would Mr. 2 be on the same route as us from Little Garden? Especially after what Sanji told Crocodile while pretending to be Mr. 3.”

Sanji hums, coming up behind me to look out at the city. “It does make sense, he seemed pretty upset when he thought I mishandled things.”

I nod. “So we don’t need to spare him a second thought.”

“Still, we should be discreet until we get those disguises and supplies,” Usopp pipes up.

“There should be somewhere in the outskirts we can hide,” Vivi suggests.

I nod. “Ok. Sanji and Chopper, both of you haven’t been seen by any Baroque Works agents, so this is all on you.”

Sanji clenches his fists with a determined look. “Whatever you say!”

Chopper puffs out his chest. “You can leave it to us!”

I snort. “I trust you two to make good choices,” then I get up in Sanji’s face, “but you listen to me, bucko. We are going to be trekking through the desert. That means we need to dress *practically,* not *provocatively.”* His face turns bright red from the proximity. “I want a hat and pants with pockets,” I smile, patting him on his blushing cheek.

He drops into a crouch with an intense aura. “I will not fail you in this!”

_____

Finding a half destroyed house on the outskirts proves easy. Sanji and Chopper are sent out with a loan from Nami (it takes every single one of us to talk her out of exuberant interest rates) while the rest of us wait.

“I’m very relieved at least this town seems ok,” Vivi sighs.

“Vivi. You said you had a plan for stopping the rebel army, right?” Zoro asks. She gives him a nod and he continues. “So what do you need us to do to help?” Vivi blinks at him in surprise. “If you want this over before it even starts we have to move quickly.”

Vivi hesitates. “I… yeah, but our agreement was only to bring me to Alabasta—”

She’s cut off my Nami knocking her on the head. “Knock that off. We came all the way here, we’re not going to leave you high and dry now.”

“Besides, I wanna see this Warlord of the Sea,” Zoro adds.

Nami points at him. “Be quiet!” Then she swivels her head and shoves her face right at Vivi, who turns scarlet. “You listen to me! We’re not going to leave!”

“They *are* trying to kill us all. And I don’t like leaving things unfinished,” I pipe up, a smirk tossed at Vivi.

“Also I want our reward money!” Nami grins.

Zoro groans. “You’re terrible.”

“You’re in debt,” both me and Nami speak at the same time.

Zoro’s face drops and Usopp bursts out laughing. Even Vivi starts snickering.

“There’s an oasis city northwest of here called Yuba. The rebel army is based there, so I think it should be our first stop so I can head off the revolution,” Vivi explains.

I hum. “Honestly it may be a better course of action to just head right to Rainbase and beat up Crocodile.”

Vivi shoots me a look. “Why? If I stop the rebels, that's one less problem on our plates.”

I raise my eyebrow at her. “If you *can.* I’m willing to bet there’s Baroque Works agents in both the rebel army and the royal guard. That means even if you do quell the actual rebels, Crocodile can just have his agents restart the chaos at his whim.” Her face reddens for an entirely different reason from earlier. “I’m just saying, maybe cutting the heads off this hydra

isn't the play. Let's skip the disappointment and just burn the motherfucker," I state, crossing my arms.

Vivi's face drops into a frown. "But —"

Her response is cut off by Sanji (now in more appropriate clothing) and Chopper rounding the broken wall with a shittone of bags and big smiles. "My loves, I'm back!" Sanji sings. "Oh and you bastards too." He tosses a sack of clothing at the boys then presents Nami, Vivi and I with our own bags. I start pulling shit out of mine before Sanji hands me a hat with a yellow sheer scarf wrapped around it. "For you, my dear!" he croons.

I give him a big smile and a kiss on the cheek before turning back to my bag and starting to strip. "Wait a second! Do you have any decency?!" Usopp screeches.

I pull my shirt off unperturbed. "I possess no shame."

Sanji had gotten me dull yellow wide legged pants (with lots of pockets, thank god) and a green open front tunic with yellow trim. I pop on my hat and hook the sunglasses that were inside the bag down the front of my sports bra.

"You're a literal godsent, Sanji—" I cut myself off when I turn around and see what he got for the girls. They're still dressed like they were in canon. I give him a flat look. "Dancers are not discreet, darling."

He wipes his nosebleed and turns away while puffing out heart shaped clouds. "I think dancers are very discreet!"

Nami slowly spins in her new attire. "I think it's gorgeous, I totally approve," she smirks.

Vivi looks significantly more concerned with her outfit. "Sanji, we're crossing a desert…" she says hesitantly, hiking her skirt up higher.

Sanji swoons and sighs. “If you get tired I’ll carry you!”

Nami snickers and slaps me on the back. “Ok, now go get the Captain, First Mate!”

I throw my head back and groan. “I didn’t sign up to be an idiot wrangler…”

She smirks and pushes me out of our hiding place. “Yes, you did!”

_____

It takes a pathetically short amount of time for me to get lost. You stop to buy jerky for five minutes and suddenly you’re in a different damn part of town! I am going to have to fix this *fast,* or my ass is gonna end up like Zoro.

I tap a random lady on the shoulder. “Excuse me, I’m looking for a restaurant. Bean something.”

That’s where Luffy is headed, right? Uhhh Bean House? No, that sounds dumb that’s not right…

“Do you mean Spice Bean?” the woman asks, an amused look in her eyes.

I snap. “Yes! That’s it!”

She laughs. “It’s just down that road there. I’d be careful though, they say some guy dropped dead in there!”

I wave her off with a smile. “Don’t worry about me, thank you for the directions!”

I barely make it ten feet down the street before something with all the force of a flying rocket slams into my side. I yelp as I’m dragged the opposite direction down the street. I turn my head to my assailant, arm raised for a punch.

Unfortunately, the person dragging me through the town is my very own Captain.

“Wha—” I’m cut off by a huge plume of smoke shooting up behind us. I whip my head to Luffy. “WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

He gives me a wide eyed look. “NOTHING!”

I start pumping my legs in tandem with his. “I DON’T BELIEVE YOU!”

A giant crowd of Marines come spilling into the streets behind us while I grab Luffy by the hand and tug him in the direction the rest of our crew is in. “So how was your lunch?” I ask between breaths.

He shrugs. “Food was good, but that smokey guy showed up so I had to rush.”

I use my free hand to massage my temple. “Fucking Smoker, forgot about that dude.” I finally spot the ruins the rest of our crew is squatting in. “UP AND AT ‘EM, SHITBIRDS! WE’RE LEAVING!” I scream, blowing right past them.

There’s screams of outrage from the crew as they start running after us.

“Get back, men! Domino and Strawhat are mine!” Smoker’s gravelly voice yells behind us.

“Why me too?!” I shriek, trying desperately to run faster. It’s not going well.

There’s a sudden flash of heat at our backs and a yell.

The crew skids to a halt and turns. Out of the fire emerges a man, shirtless with the mark of Whitebeard across his back, and an orange cowboy hat on a head of wild black hair. “Give it up,” he laughs, “you may be smoke, but I’m fire. You don’t stand a chance.”

Was that Travis Willingham with a southern accent? OH MY GOD ACE HAS TRAVIS WILLINGHAM'S VOICE—

Luffy’s jaw drops beside me, his hand momentarily tightening in mine. “Ace..?!”

The man in question looks over his shoulder at us, a smirk stretched across freckled cheeks. “You haven’t changed a bit, Luffy.” Ace cracks his neck back and forth. “You go ahead and run, I’ll take care of these guys and catch up to y’all,” he says, dropping into a crouch and turning back to the horde of Marines.

Luffy flashes a blinding grin before he’s spinning on his heel and pulling me in the direction of the ship. “Let's go!” he hollers.

“Wait, who is that guy?” Nami asks as the rest of them join us in running.

“Ask questions on the ship!” I order, trying not to trip on the loose sand. I fail miserably and almost pull Luffy to the ground with a shriek. He manages to catch me, a little too late considering the mouthful of sand I got but whatever, and drags me back to my feet.

“You’re so clumsy, Ed!” he laughs.

I glare and spit the sand at him. “I don’t wanna hear that from you!”

We somehow manage to get to the ship in one piece despite the sand's best efforts to stop me. I can see Vivi handing the envelope I gave her, much more full than before, off to Karoo before he's running off into the desert while I help Nami roll a barrel across the deck.

"So spill the beans, who the hell was that?" Zoro asks, sitting down on top of a different barrel.

"Oh, he's my brother!" Luffy says with a laugh.

The crew around me explodes in shock. "Brother?!"

Luffy tilts back and forth on the rail and I lean into it beside him. "Yup! He's three years older than me, and I've never beat him in a fight. He's super strong!"

Nami rubs her head. "A family of monsters, then…"

Usopp points an accusing finger at me where I'm leaning on the railing. "Why don't you look surprised?"

I shrug. "I knew."

He slaps a hand to his face. "Of course you did. What, did you do a background check before you agreed to join Luffy?"

I snort. "No, he told me. And I was scammed onto the crew by his cute face."

There's a thud on the bannister and then a smiling face is in my periphery. "He has that effect," Ace laughs while Luffy falls forward onto the deck.

“Ace!” he cheers.

Ace, still crouched beside me, ducks into something of a bow. “Nice to meet y’all! Thanks for taking care of my little brother.”

We all dip into similar bows. “Oh, no not at all,” we all say in unison.

“No really, I know he can be a lot,” Ace grins.

“No trouble,” we all say again. It’s actually kinda weird that we can all do that, now that I think about it… Whatever.

I tilt my head and give him a once over. “Boy, I’d love me a cowboy hat like that…” I mumble. He gives me a cheeky grin and tips the brim of his hat at me.

Sanji brings an unlit cigarette to his lips. “Well why don’t you come in, I’ll make some tea.”

Ace laughs, “oh, I’d hate to impose.” Then he points at Sanji's cigarette and the end sparks to life, Sanji’s face going pink as he takes a hit. Ace blows his finger like a smoking gun and gives me a wink. “It’s an absolute pleasure to meet y’all.”

That was fruity as FUCK.

I throw my head back and laugh.

“So what are you doing here, Ace?” Luffy asks, finally picking himself off the floor and leaning across me.

Ace raises an eyebrow. “You didn’t get my message in Drum? Eh, nevermind. No biggie.” His eyes do a quick sweep of the crew. “Anyways. I’m here on a little bit of business, but I’m glad I saw you,” he flashes a sly smile at Luffy, “Luffy, why don’t you come join the Whitebeard Pirates? With your friends of course.”

Luffy blows him a raspberry. “Nope.”

Usopp’s jaw drops. “Whitebeard?! So is that mark on your back real?”

Ace nods. “Yup. It’s my pride and joy. Whitebeard is the greatest pirate I’ve ever known,” he looks intently at his brother, “I want him to be the King of the Pirates, not you Luffy.”

Luffy smiles. “That’s fine! I’ll just fight him.”

I snort. Ace gives me a sharp eyed smile. “Something funny about that?”

I give him a lopsided grin. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just…”

Is this going to piss him off? Eh.

“I’ve never even met Whitebeard, but I’m willing to bet every berri I’ve ever swindled out of Zoro that he doesn’t want to be King of the Pirates.”

I ignore Zoro’s quiet “swindled?” in favour of Ace’s raised eyebrow.

“Who needs a title he could have taken at any time when he’s already got his greatest treasure?” I muse. His eyebrow raises even further. “You. His family. All of ‘em,” I elaborate.

Ace gives me a sideways look before it settles into a wry smile. “Huh. You’re an interesting one. You sure know how to pick ‘em Luffy.”

Luffy laughs and burrows into my side. “I know! Aren’t they great!” I snicker and worm my fingers under his hat to muss up his hair.

“How could someone that sensible be Luffy’s brother?” Nami mumbles.

“I was sure he’d be as batshit as Luffy is,” Usopp adds.

“The sea’s a weird place,” Sanji says, taking another hit off his cigarette.

“What a great guy, cares about his brother..!” Zoro grits out, actual tears forming in his eyes.

“I wish I had a brother like that,” Chopper cries.

“Do you guys wanna be worried about that?” I suddenly ask, jerking my head toward the surrounding ocean. There’s some confused noises before the group finally takes notice of the boats approaching us. A row of Baroque Works Billions ships are sailing towards us, absolutely crawling with idiots.

“Let me handle them,” Ace says, jumping off the rail back down to Striker, which is moored to the Merry.

“Is he going to go by himself?” Nami questions.

“Don’t worry about him,” me and Zoro say at the same time. I shoot him the stink eye. This unison thing is getting old.

I flick open my spyglass so I can watch closely.

Ace's small ship zips across the water, flames spitting off his feet. We watch him jump into the air, Striker going underwater as he soars over the ships as a flaming blur. Ace disappears over the apex of the boats, before they all light up in a gigantic blaze.

The crew make gasps and sounds of surprise beside me and I can't help the slightly deranged smile that takes over my face. That was so *fucking cool!*

"Save a horse, ride a cowboy I guess," I mumble to myself.

I ignore the weird looks from my crew.

_____

A drink is shoved into my hands that is immediately passed to a newly returned Ace. I point a threatening finger at Zoro. "Unless the next drink you pass me is peach flavoured, I'm throwing it back in your face."

He sticks his tongue out at me and I do the same back, because I'm a very mature person. The other boys are making nonsensical cheers while Ace stares at us with something like amusement.

"Ace! You sure you don't want to join us?" Luffy asks.

"Can't. I'm chasing down this guy right now. He's a pirate named Blackbeard," Ace responds, taking a sip of the drink I passed him.

"The guy who attacked Drum?" Vivi murmurs.

“He used to be a member of the Second Division of the Whitebeard Pirates. One of *my* men. But he committed the worst sin on a pirate ship; he killed a crewmate and left. As Commander, it’s my responsibility to find him and take care of him,” he continues, an odd distance in his face.

“Blackbeard, huh?” I muse.

Nami shoots me a look as she sits down beside me. “You know him?”

I shrug a single shoulder. “Personally? No. But I’ve definitely heard about him.”

Ace’s eyes dart to me.

Gee, how much can I give away here? Assuming my letter worked, Sabo should be on Ace’s ass at some point. Will telling him about Blackbeard be any use?

Better safe than sorry. But I’ve gotta play this carefully.

“I’d be happy to get you some information if you feel like sticking around,” I offer.

His brow scrunches for a second before it’s smoothing out into an easy grin. “That sounds great, actually. Sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.”

I give him a grin back. “E. D. Domino, you can call me Ed. I’m the First Mate.”

His eyes light up. “No kidding? Oh, wait! I’ve seen your poster!”

I smother a groan into my hands while Nami pats my back. “Don’t bring up the poster!” Ace laughs loudly, slapping his knee.

“We’re coming up on the bend to the Sandora river,” Vivi announces, placing a rough map down in front of us. She points to a few locations on it, “Wwe’ll land at Erumalu, then continue on foot to Yuba.”

I frown down at the map. “You sure about that?”

Vivi glances up at me. “Yes? It hasn’t been nearly long enough for the map to be incorrect, and it’s a straight shot through the desert if we navigate it correctly—”

“No,” I interrupt, “are you sure *Yuba* is still the best idea?”

Her face drops into a glare. “Yes. I *will* convince the rebel army, and I *will* save my country.”

I roll my eyes and lazily put my hands up in mock surrender. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Ace poorly disguise a smile by biting his lip.

“Let’s go beat the rebels up!” Luffy cheers.

Vivi knocks him on the head. “No! We’re going to *talk* to them!”

Luffy rubs his head then hoists his cup back up. “To doing that then!”

The rest of the crew knock their cups against his.

“Here here!”

_____

I disappear into the ladies room soon after that to ring up Jonah. “What is it this time?” he groans.

“Don’t sound so disappointed to hear me, you’ll hurt my feelings!” I gasp dramatically. Mr. President rolls his eyes. “Things ok over there with Smoker chasing us through the Grand Line like a maniac?” I ask.

There’s another groan. *“No.* Since the so-called guardian of the entrance to the Grand Line is gone, all these small-time pirates seem to think it's the absolute perfect time to ransack the place before leaving. I’ve had to process so many goddamn idiots I might be going prematurely grey.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Aw, that’s too bad.” I let my expression sober out. “Anyway, I need the posters and any information you can get me on a certain crew,” I say, a new note of seriousness in my tone.

Jonah must pick up on it because the President suddenly looks much more invested in my words. “Which crew?”

I scowl and gnaw on the end of my pencil. “The Blackbeard Pirates.”

———

The information Jonah gets me and the posters he’s promised to send are a small step forward to helping Ace, but a step nonetheless. I also spend the time writing out everything I know about his Devil Fruit and its… weirdness.

After that it’s back up to the top deck. I get out there just in time for a News Coo to drop an envelope on my head. I stare at the thing as it flies away. “Never underestimate the fucking mail service…” I mumble, folding my notes to stick them in the envelope and looking around the deck. I don’t immediately spot Ace around so I head up to the galley.

The sudden force of me throwing the door open isn't enough to disturb Sanji from his cooking aside from an offhanded greeting, but it is enough to startle Ace into tearing his eyes away from where he was blatantly staring at our cooks ass.

I pause. I blink at him. Ace blinks back. A shit eating grin slowly spreads across my face. A look of dawning horror blossoms across his.

I spin on my heel and run back for the deck, envelope dropped forgotten on the floor. "NAMI!" I holler over the rail.

"YOU LITTLE SHIT—" I hear Ace yell behind me, accompanied by the sound of the bench scraping across the floor.

I spot Nami down on the deck as she looks up at me confused. I grin and sprint down toward her. "Nami you're not gonna fucking belive this—" I'm cut off by a hollering weight tackling me over the railing of the Merry, my foot smacking into it with a sharp twang and my shoe flying off.

I scream as me and Ace go overboard. When we surface in the water I violently shake Ace's limp body. "YOU MOTHERFUCKER! WHY DOES THIS KEEP HAPPENING TO ME?!"

He gives me a droopy smile. "Worth it," he slurs.

I throw my head back and scream again. "What is wrong with your family?!"

———

Silent tears drip slowly down my scowling face.

“You can stop crying now,” Nami says impatiently, leaning over Chopper's shoulder as he finishes wrapping up my ankle to hand me my dropped envelope.

“It’s just a sprain, but trekking through the desert may not be the best thing for you right now. You honestly shouldn’t even be moving at all…” he says hesitantly.

I keep crying while I stick my envelope in my rapidly drying pants. Guess that’s one good thing about the desert, it’s too hot to stay wet for long.

“I’d realistically prefer it if you don’t move at all for at least two weeks, but we really can’t afford to delay our trip,” Chopper says with a sigh.

I shrug. “What can you do? I think I’ll be fine by tomorrow anyways.” That’s how this bullshit works, right? Maybe if I just believe it really hard, through the powers of grit and determination I’ll just… magically be better tomorrow.

“Seriously what is your deal? What did you even *do?”* Zoro asks, coming up on my other side.

“Ace tackled them over the rail and it caught their foot,” Nami explains.

I shoot a glare though my still damp eyes at the still damp Ace, who’s sitting in the corner gloomily. “He’s lucky he didn’t break it,” I snap.

He throws his hands up. “I said I was sorry!”

I furiously wipe my tears. “Fuck you!”

He gets an affronted look. “Fuck *you!”*

Zoro rolls his eyes. “How much longer are you going to be mad?”

I glower at my foot. “Probably half an hour.”

Nami raises an eyebrow at me. “That's it?”

I shrug. “I don’t need to draw this out too much.”

“You don’t need to draw it out at *all,”* Ace groans.

“Ace?” I say impatiently.

“Yeah?”

“You’re a Devil Fruit user, correct?”

“Yes?”

“And you’re made of fire.”

“Yup.”

“And you just tackled me INTO *THE OCEAN!”*

Ace throws his hands up. “I never said I was a *smart* one!”

Luffy has not stopped rolling on the floor laughing since the two of us had gotten fished up.

“Is there a reason why you’re still crying though?” Usopp asks, tinkering off to the side of our idiocy.

I shrug and smear my palms over my doubtlessly blotchy face. “Eh, just how I am. I was a huge crybaby when I was younger too.”

Ace barks out a laugh, slapping his knee and leaning forward with a wide smile. “What a coincidence, so was Luffy!”

Luffy stops his laughing fit to point at Ace. “Don’t tell them *that!”* he whines.

I also point at Ace. “Don’t try to make me like you!”

Ace throws his head back and cackles.

Chapter End Notes

Ace with a southern twang is something that can be so personal—

Wait Southern Ace is just Fjord before he got his shit together…

Either way. Ain’t nothing straight about a man that hates himself that much. Ain't nothing straight about a cowboy.

Ed's Alabasta fit because I can.

Chapter 33: Chapter Thirty Three: It’s A Kindness, Highness

Chapter Summary

Eat Your Young - Hozier

After I nearly trip and eat shit for the tenth time in half as many minutes, Nami finally snaps. “For the love for all that is good, someone carry them! This is slowing us down too much!”

Chapter Notes

Ace and Ed's no good very bad desert adventure.

I've realized even though I reference the anime all the time with the voice actor jokes, this whole thing really is more manga adjacent. Bar what's happening with Ace sticking around.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We land at Erumalu a couple hours later. I’m trying to find a way to get my ass off the ship without either cracking my skull open or twisting my ankle worse, while the rest of my crew does something with some weird looking… shelled seal-ish things.

“Do you want some help?” Ace calls from below me, staring up and clearly trying to hide his amusement while shrugging on a long thin cardigan he had in his watermelon looking bag.

I glare at him. “No! Just let me figure this out…” I wonder if I can slide down on my butt..?

I can’t. I slip almost immediately and with a yelp I’m free falling ungracefully from the side of the ship. I stick my injured foot straight up in hopes of only breaking my back on the way down instead of injuring my ankle slightly more.

Instead of my back snapping into fragments I'm caught in two strong arms. My leg is still kicked up when I twist my head and get a faceful of Ace's shit eating grin. "You better wipe that look the fuck off your face before I start biting," I say seriously.

Jesus dude this guy is warm as hell. Talk about a portable heater.

He deposits me gently on my feet and I glare up at him. I'm really starting to hate people taller than me. He just grins cheekily down at me. "I'm sure you had that under complete control," he drawls.

I glare harder. "I did." I did not.

"Ed! Ace! Stop dicking around, we're leaving!" Zoro hollers over. I harumph and start (slowly, even without the slightly fucked ankle, sand is fucking dangerous) making my way over to the rest of the group.

We make the short trip over a dune before we arrive in the sandy ruins of Erumalu. Vivi stares out across the expanse with a distant look in her eyes. "This place used to be called the City of Green. Now look what has become of it…"

"What happened to it?" Nami asks quietly.

Vivi sighs and starts to explain as we descend into the ruins. "Erumalu got its main water supply from the rainwater, but it hasn't rained a single drop here in three years." She looks heartbroken by the skull Luffy pokes with the tip of his sandal, half sticking out of the sand. "The only place that was getting any rain was the capital, Alubarna. But even that's stopped now, thanks to the Dance Powder fiasco."

Usopp raises an eyebrow. "Dance Powder?"

Vivi nods, steeling herself and turning away from the skull while I bat Luffy away from it. "It's powder that calls rain."

Nami steps up to Vivi's side to keep explaining. "I'll skip the scientific explanation, since it would go over all your thick heads. In essence it steals rain from neighbouring places. So any positive effect it could have is ruined by the conflict it causes."

Vivi nods. "My father was framed for using it in the capital, and it hasn't rained at all since."

I shove my sunglasses on my face as we leave the shade of a half destroyed building. "Zoro, 10,000 berri Crocodile is the one keeping it from raining."

Zoro throws me a glance over his shoulder. "You're on. That's straight fucking looney."

Vivi gives me an offended and incredulous look. "Yes, please, make bets about my county's hardships."

I shrug. "Gotta keep my coffers full somehow. And tragedy always makes for good money making."

Vivi stops short in front of another skull, this one with a large hole through the back. "...What did they ever do?" she whispers. "The people who live in this country, my father… what could we have done to deserve this?"

She sinks to her knees and cradles the skull to her forehead. Something uncomfortable sinks in my stomach and I look away. Luffy, Usopp and Sanji stalk past me to a crumbling building.

"Crocodile… He has no right to do this to us!" Vivi grits out, hunching further in on herself. "I… I can't let him get away with this!" she screams into the sand.

I keep my eyes down as there's a loud crack and noises of destruction from the boy's direction.

Ace walks past me and scoops out a hole in the sand, which Vivi gently deposits the skull into. She marks the spot with a stick, and folds her hands and bows her head. She whispers a few words I can't understand with reverence.

Luffy stalks back up to my side. "Let's move forward already. I'm anxious now," he announces, cracking his shoulders. Vivi rises to her feet, fierce conviction in her eyes.

"I'm still of the mind we go right to the ass kicking," I mumble.

"No. We will go to Yuba, and I will speak with the rebels," Vivi states, marching forward without so much as a glance at me.

I furrow my brow and wordlessly follow.

_____

After I nearly trip and eat shit for the tenth time in half as many minutes, Nami finally snaps. "For the love for all that is good, someone carry them! This is slowing us down too much!"

I throw my head back. "Yes please! I hate walking in sand!"

"I'll do it! I volunteer!" Sanji hollers, sticking his arms up best he can around all the shit he already has in them.

"No! You're already carrying all our bags!" Nami says, exasperated. "Zoro, you do it!"

Zoro and I both grimace. We shake our heads in unison. "No way in hell," we both spit.

Usopp raises his eyebrow.

“This idiot is gonna get lost and take me with him! I’d rather not see you guys again a week later in *Alubarna,”* I groan.

Zoro squints at me. “I just don’t want to.”

Luffy raises his hand. “Oh! Ace is great at those! He can do it!”

I snap and point to the man in question. “Ha! You reap what you sow, firecracker. You break it, you carry it across the desert!”

Ace gives a good natured groan before crouching down and putting out his arms. “All aboard the S.S.ACE, departing momentarily.” I whoop and jump on his back. He “oof!”s under the pressure but stands up no problem. I idly kick my feet as we pick back up walking.
“Anybody ever tell you you give off way too much body heat?” I ask mildly.

I can feel Ace’s laugh rumble through his back. “Nope, haven't had a complaint yet. Are you going to be the first?”

“I just might, with the fucking temperature of this hellish sandbox. It’s hotter than a witches coochie out here,” I grumble, fanning myself with my hand. Ace belts out a startled laugh so loud it makes the rest of the group turn back to us in bewilderment.

“Keep up, you two! Don’t go wandering off!” Nami calls from up ahead.

“We won’t! We’re not Zoro!” I call back. There’s laughter that rings out from the group.

I duck my head under the shade of Ace’s hat. “I was having a snowball fight less than a week ago, this is too drastic of a change,” I groan, sweaty forehead smacking into the collar of Ace’s cardigan.

Ace hums. “I don’t really like snow. S’why I always use my Devil Fruit powers to make the weather better on winter islands.”

I nod, blowing some of his hair out of my face. “Shit like that is A) why I think Crocodile is keeping it from raining, and B) why I wish I had a crazy power like that.”

Ace chuckles but doesn't add anything else.

I brush more of his hair out of my way and make a face. “Is your hair so greasy because the oils make you more flammable?”

He lets out an offended squawk. “What? No! We’re in Alabasta! Water is scarce!”

I give him a disbelieving hum. “Not that scarce.” He makes a few more wordless grumbles as we descend into silence.

“So you guys are gonna beat up Crocodile?” Ace suddenly asks.

I rest my chin on his shoulder. “Yup. Well, Luffy will. Gonna put his ass in the dirt. Er — sand.”

Ace huffs a laugh. “Honestly, a pirate trying to steal a kingdom sounds like a bad joke.”

“No kidding,” I agree.

“What kind of pirate settles down on a throne?” he continues.

I hum. “The kind that finds himself in a desert with the power of the Sand Sand Fruit?” I say rhetorically.

Ace snorts. “Either way, there might be another side to the whole takeover thing.”

“A deeper goal,” we say in unison. Ace tosses me a smile over his shoulder. I snort, fiddling with the medallion hanging off his hat string.

“You have any idea as to what it could be, detective?” Ace asks.

I hum. “I mean… It’s probably something that can only happen or only exists in this country. And I’d ask Vivi what that could be, but we don’t exactly… get along.”

He makes an understanding sound. “I was wondering about that. You don’t seem to like her very much.”

I burrow my face into his neck with a frown. “It’s not that I don’t like her, I like her lots! She’s just… kinda infuriating. I know she’s trying her best and she’s doing a fine job, I just wish she’d focus on the bigger picture.”

Ace is silent through my rant. “Sounds like a communication issue. Maybe you should just have a conversation with her,” he offers.

I scoff. “Practice what you preach, cowboy. You look like you’ve never communicated a feeling in your life.”

He barks out a laugh. “I can’t argue with that! Fine then, keep beefing with the princess. Just know if you don’t fix it you’ll probably end up fighting more until it explodes.”

I pick my head up to keep talking, then pause. I cast my eyes around the planes of sand, turning behind me and glancing around as well. “Uh, Ace?” I say hesitantly. He hums.

“...Where is everyone else?”

Because we are alone in the desert right now. My crewmates aren’t even specs on the horizon at this point.

“...Ah *shit,”* Ace curses, coming to a stop.

I throw my head back and groan. “Zoro is gonna make so much fun of me!”

God, how do you find people in a desert? This isn’t like the time my mom left me in a supermarket, we can’t just stay still until someone finds us.

Ace pulls a compass from his pocket. “This place we’re going is northwest, right? We’ll just have to meet them there,” he says, correcting his course and getting back to walking.

I groan again. “How the fuck did you lose them? The desert is *barren,* there's nothing to hide behind!” Seriously, was he walking with his eyes closed? And what about the other idiots? Have they even noticed we’re gone?!

“You need to calm down. Everything is gonna work out fine. Nothing is gonna happen to your crew or my brother in the meantime. How dangerous can a desert really be?” Ace soothes.

I smack my head into his shoulder with another long groan.

———

I guess I slipped into a little cat nap while we were walking, because I’m suddenly jostled to consciousness by Ace coming to a dead halt. “Wha..?” I mumble, lifting my head and wiping a trail of drool from the corner of my mouth.

When I blink open my bleary eyes, I'm met with the startling image of a giant lizard staring at us. "Um," Ace starts hesitantly, "I don't know what that is."

Neither do I, to be honest. I vaguely remember Ace encountering some kind of lizard and having a standoff in the anime, but this thing looks nothing like that and it's certainly no Sandora Lizard. It's more along the lines of a speckled Komodo Dragon.

The fact that it's over fifteen feet tall and staring at us with its tongue flickering and eyes hungry is not making me any more inclined to get to know if it has other traits in common with a real Komodo Dragon.

"We… should probably run," I whisper into Ace's ear. He slowly nods and starts taking steps back.

"I don't really wanna fight this thing with you on my back," he whispers back. "Also I'm like, *really* hungry right now."

"Yeah," I say with a gulp, "me too."

The lizard takes a single slow step forward. We freeze. "If this thing is gonna chase us anyways, just go northwest," I whisper. He nods slowly, taking a step to the side.

The lizard lunges.

We both scream as Ace starts booking it in a wide arc around the monstrosity. My head is jerked back as my hat files off my head, only staying attached by the string digging into my throat. "HOLY FUCK!" I choke out while the overgrown lizard nips at our heels.

I twist my head around to see how close the fucker is getting, and get a faceful of swiping claw. My eyes widen and my jaw drops in another scream. "DUCK OH MY GOD DUCK!" I

holler, yanking Ace's head back by his greasy ass hair.

He yelps as his hair is pulled, but drops to his knees and skids forward on the coarse sand. I tuck my legs up as heat emanates from the ground, looking behind there's a line of crystalized sand like glass where Ace skidded.

"That's really cool!" I yell as we slide back upright.

"Thanks!" Ace yells back.

I pull my pistol from my belt and say a quick prayer mostly consisting of swears and threats. "Ace, hold onto my legs tight, I'm doing something stupid!" I holler, hiking my knees up and hooking my ankles together around his sternum despite the throbbing it sends through my foot.

"What?" he grunts, but does it anyway. I take a deep breath and let go of his shoulders. Dropping back so I can see the scaly fuck upside down, I point my pistol.

Dear god please let this work.

I fire a shot at its face. It hits it right on the snout. It makes a loud cry, whipping its head back and forth and going slightly off course.

"Keep your legs up! It may get a little warm!" Ace suddenly yells. I use the power of daily morning crunches to swing my upper body back upright just as fire shoots up all around where my head was.

We blast up into the air with a burst of heat. I shriek and grapple harder to Ace while he laughs. I very pointedly don't look down as we rocket higher. "Is this safe?!" I screech.

Ace just continues to laugh. “Relax, it’s totally safe!” he cackles, raising us higher into the air while I dig my fingers into his arms.

“I don’t fucking believe you!” I cry, taking a quick peek behind us. The lizard is slowly getting left in the dust as we soar over the sandy landscape, and I fight back a scream as I realize how high we’ve gotten.

“For the love of all that is holy please get closer to the ground,” I whimper, fingers clenching in the fabric of his cardigan.

“You scared of heights?” he chuckles, heeding my request and bringing us down by a little bit. Not nearly enough if you ask me, but I’ll take what I can get from this maniac.

“No!” I snap, taking another glance down. “I’m scared of your reckless ass and clearly bonkers sense of self preservation!”

He makes a disagreeing sound. “Hey! I'll have you know I think lots before I make stupid choices—”

He’s cut off by us suddenly smacking into a mass of feathery squawking fury. We both start screaming, again, as a seagull (which has no business being this far into the desert, stupid fuck) flaps in our faces with wild abandon.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” Ace screams, swinging his arms at the thing. “I’LL FUCKING COOK YOU, BIRD! GET LOST!”

I swing my legs up in a panic, trying to kick the angry seabird away from us. My sweaty fingers slide off Ace’s cardigan. My legs, no longer held by Ace, slip from around his waist.

I drop off Ace’s back.

My scream catches in my throat as I start freefalling. I vaguely hear Ace call my name before the sheer speed of the wind rushing through my hair and ears obscures all sound. My body twists around as stray sand particles scrape on my arms.

Oh my god. I'm going to die.

The thought comes with startling clarity.

I'm never going to make it to the timeskip.

I cease my flailing in the air.

I'm never going to make it to Wano.

Through the disorientation I realize I'm en route to plummet into a sandy grave face first.

I'm never going to see the One Piece.

The ground approaches at dizzying speeds.

I'm never gonna see Luffy again—

A hand snags into the fabric of my shirt. I jerk to a halt, inches from the sand. I can count the grains as my harsh breathing scatters them.

There's a long moment of silence.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!”

“ACE?! ED?!”

“WHERE THE FUCK—”

“DID YOU GUYS JUST FALL OUT OF THE SKY?!”

I huff a long relieved laugh as I’m gently lowered the rest of the way to the ground. Ace flops into the sand beside me and throws his head back, taking deep breaths and wiping sweat from under his hat.

We make disbelieving eye contact for a second before bursting into uncontrollable laughter. Luffy slams into the ground beside us, scattering dust and sand as he shoves his face at us both. “That was awesome! What the hell were you guys doing?”

I start laughing harder, flipping onto my back to stare at my bewildered crew. I grab onto Luffy with one hand and stick my other straight up in the air. “I’M ALIVE!” I holler to the sky. Then I turn and point at Ace with a manic grin. “That was not safe, you lying piece of shit!”

He flops down onto his back, still breathing heavily and laughing. “No! No it wasn’t!”

Nami comes up to my side and starts turning my head back and forth in her palms, looking me over critically. “What the fuck happened to you two? We turn around one minute and you’re just *gone!”*

I lean into her hands with another breathless laugh. “Nami, darling, I have no goddamn clue.”

———

It takes an absurd amount of time for us to get situated after that. After we exchange tales of our separate adventures (“Why do you have a camel?” “Don’t ask.” “You guys got scammed by *birds?”* “Very crafty birds! And you guys also got attacked by a lizard?” “Yup, big Komodo Dragon lookin thing.” “A dragon wearing a kimono?!” “...No, Luffy.”) we get back to hitting the road, this time with me saddled up on a very enthusiastic Sanji.

After that we barely get in another hour of travel before the sun is setting on the horizon and Vivi announces we’ll be bedding down for the evening.

The rate at which the desert cools is astounding. In the span of us setting all our shit down and starting a fire, it’s dropped to temperatures so low I can’t stop my fingers from spasming the entire time I reload my gun.

Needless to say, I am unhappy with this arrangement. “Where’s the literal human heater when you need him? His ass owes me!” I mutter through chattering teeth.

The man himself is sat aside, eating the food Sanji had so generously made for us. I saunter over and kick him in the thigh. “Pick your plate up if you don’t wanna lose it,” I announce.

He gives me a confused look while he chews, but lifts the plate up slowly. I belly flop into his lap the second there’s enough clearance. I do bang my chin off his knee so I can’t claim perfect execution, but given that he’s warm as a fucking radiator I can’t make myself mind. I immediately relax, an involuntary sigh slipping out my mouth as I snuggle into his lap.

“Are you always like this?” Ace asks with an amused tilt to his voice, setting his plate back on top of my shoulder blade and scooping more food into his mouth.

I scrunch my nose, shifting back a little. “Sorry.” He scoffs and pushes me back down with his plate.

“They are!” Luffy laughs, slinging himself over Ace’s shoulder and stealing a mouthful of food right from the plate.

“You little gremlin!” Ace grumbles, trying to move the plate away from Luffy’s stretching head to no avail. He eventually just ends up sticking the whole fucking plate in his mouth to prove a point, and I’m forced to punch him in the stomach to make him spit the damn thing out.

Luffy manages to climb over Ace like his namesake and sprawls over my back with his legs in the air. I’m smooshed right into Ace’s abs and have to fight the urge to elbow Luffy in the face when his chin digs into the underside of my ribs.

“Take some responsibility Luf, you made me clingy,” I mumble into Ace’s stomach as it starts rumbling in laughter. Luffy’s arms snake around my torso as he squirms closer.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says matter-of-factly. “You’ve been clingy since we met.”

Ace starts laughing harder, bending at the waist and squishing us together. His laughter is abruptly cut off as he slumps down completely boneless on top of us. We both let out squeals as we’re smooshed even closer together and partially crushed under Ace’s weight.

“We made it a whole day through the desert, and his narcolepsy kicks in *now?!”* I wheeze, legs flailing as Luffy’s squishy face is imprinted into my back.

“Honestly, you guys are such weirdos,” Nami’s voice sighs. I groan again, and then a blanket is being tossed over the pile of us. “And you’re officially not my problem. Goodnight, idiots.”

I kick my leg out in what I think is her direction. “Nami! Wait Nami help us!” I yell, muffled though it is. I’m ignored.

“It’s fine, just wait until he wakes up,” Luffy’s voice says behind me. I sigh, but just settle down and enjoy the warmth for the time being.

I've pretty much dozed off by the time Ace jerks back upright. "Huh..? Where..?" he mumbles, pushing the blanket off his head. I shush him, grabbing the blanket and wrapping it around me and Luffy, before shoving him into the sand and laying on top of him.

"Shhhhh quiet. Sleepy sleepy night night time," I mumble, pulling Luffy (who already fell asleep, the shit) closer and shoving my face into Ace's pec. He sighs, but just pulls his hat over his face and throws his arms over the pair of us.

"Am I ever gonna get that information?" he mumbles.

Ah, right. He's not just here because he thinks we're fun, I have to give him shit.

"Tomorrow," I mumble back.

I just hope what I give him will be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Ace sticking around like an NPC who's quest you haven't completed yet.

Got my ass absolutely KICKED by a cold this week. It was bad. 0/10 do not recommend.

Chapter 34: Chapter Thirty Four: I'd Do Anything for You, Mrs. Highness

Chapter Summary

> *Alien Blues - Vundabar*
>
> I give him a smile that drops slightly as he takes the envelope. He raises an eyebrow at my dejected expression and I sigh. "Dude I'm losing my personal heater by giving you this, not to mention free transportation. Killing this fucker better be worth it."

Chapter Notes

> Everyone being so concerned about Ace not being able to leave yet last chapter was really funny to me. As if bro wouldn't have charcoal fried their ass and took it if he wanted out.
>
> This chapter goes out to that motherfucker who guessed this plot point ages ago. You know who you are, you shit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We're woken up bright and fucking early by Vivi and the blazing sun the next day. After literally peeling myself off Ace's washboard abs and prying Luffy off myself with the help of Nami, we're treated to breakfast by Sanji.

While the rest of the crew are packing up our supplies, I roll up to Ace. I (reluctantly, but he doesn't need to know that) hand him the envelope my stupid ass forgot I've been carrying since yesterday.

"Sorry I've kinda been holding you hostage. Honestly I forgot you weren't just here for kicks," I say sheepishly.

He laughs and flicks me on the forehead. "Don't worry about it. I don't mind spending more time with my kid brother, and meeting y'all has been nice. Maybe I needed the break."

I give him a smile that drops slightly as he takes the envelope. He raises an eyebrow at my dejected expression and I sigh. “Dude I’m losing my personal heater by giving you this, not to mention free transportation. Killing this fucker better be worth it.”

Ace’s expression darkens. “It will be,” he says solemnly.

Maybe I could push this one last time..?

I scratch at the back of my neck, not meeting his eyes. “Ace, this guy is no joke. And definitely not somebody you should be taking on alone. Have you considered… getting backup..?”

His expression shutters off. “No. This isn’t something anyone else should have to get involved in. Thank you for the information, Ed, truly. But it’s time I get back to my goal.” My face drops.

Fuck.

“No, Ace, please c’mon—” my desperate plea is cut off when I try to reach for his arm, only for him to jerk it away from me. I freeze. I retract my hands into my chest like he burned me.

For an instant I’m back to being the weird kid in elementary school no one wants to get close to because I’m too clingy.

He almost seems to hesitate for a second before he steels his expression. “No,” he repeats, quiet and firm. “I can’t drag anyone else into this. I’m… I’m going to say my goodbyes now.” And then he’s walking away from me.

I stand there for a second, then another, just staring out at the expanse of the desert.

…Fuck.

Dammit, why do you always do that? You push too fucking hard and you come on to fucking strong—

You just drove that man a step closer to death because you don't know when to quit—

It's gonna be your fucking fault if he dies, you didn't do enough—

Luffy's gonna know you killed his fucking ***brother—***

"Hey Luffy, you hang onto this," Ace's voice drifts through my ear. There's something stilted and off about his speech that really bugs me.

"Heh? It's just a scrap of paper?" Luffy responds.

Why does he even do this? Just so Luffy will know if he bites it?

I stiffen in place. I think of Luffy risking his life for that dumb scrap of paper and Ace with a fist through his chest.

I'm not gonna fucking let him.

I spin on my heel and march towards Ace, Luffy, and the rest of the crew. I swallow my discomfort and fight back the full body flinch that shrieks through me as I grab Ace by the arm and start dragging him away.

"I need to talk to you," I growl, a fierce glare shot up at him from under the brim of my hat. He blinks at me in shock before snapping his mouth shut and slowly nodding.

“Ed?!” Nami yells from behind me. The rest of the crew make similar exclamations that I ignore.

Once we’re far enough from the group that I don’t feel like we’re being listened to (though definitely still scrutinized. Luffy’s stare bears heavy upon my head—) I stop and turn my head away from Ace.

Ace takes my momentary silence as a cue to plead his case. “I told you, I’m not getting backup—”

I cut him off. “Are you running towards what you’re running towards knowing damn well it’s going to kill you?” I demand.

Ace stops short. His face goes pale and his mouth snaps shut a second time.

I stare him down. “Well?” His eyes dart away from mine. “If you’re just going after Blackbeard to satisfy some masochistic self punishment kick, go the fuck home. You have people who love you, you asshat. Don’t disrespect them by running toward death with your arms open for a damn hug.”

Ace opens and closes his mouth a couple times. “Someone has to avenge — It’s my responsibility — I’m not…” he stutters out, cutting himself off each time. He meets my eyes for a second before they’re dropping to the ground. “...It’s better me than someone else fighting this guy,” he says quietly.

“Ace,” I stop him. “Don’t… Don’t just throw your life away. I don’t give a fuck if it means nothing to you, or if you don’t think you deserve it, but it means something to the people who care about you.” I hesitate a second before throwing caution to the wind and hugging Ace around the waist.

He stiffens up for a second and I flinch. Then he’s slumping in and hunching over me to wrap his arms around me back, tight and solid. “You… You’re too damn observant for your own

good," he mumbles into my hair.

"Yeah. I know," I murmur into his chest. "Just, please, if you're not going to be careful for yourself — be careful for Luffy. And your Pops, and all the Whitebeards."

His arms tighten around me. "I'll… I'll do the best I can. But I can't ask them, or anyone, for help with this. I just… can't," he whispers.

"Fine. I can accept that. On one condition," I pull him even closer, which is hard to manage since we're halfway to particle fusion, "if they reach out to you and *offer* help, at least consider accepting."

Or if Sabo comes calling. He should at the very least have read the letter by now. What is taking him so long? Oh god, what if it didn't work?

He's quiet for a beat. "Fine," he whispers. "I'll — at the very least — consider it." I release a sigh and the tension in my shoulders unwinds. "What about you?" he adds. I make a questioning hum. "I don't have to be careful for you?" he asks in a somewhat teasing tone.

I blink. "Why would I matter?" I ask incredulously. We like, just met yesterday. Isn't this guy supposed to be prickly? Why the fuck is he warming up to me so fast? Do his attachment issues rival *mine?*

He lets out a pathetic laugh. "Geez, hypocrite much? You don't get to lecture me about self worth when you don't even consider yourself a factor." The teasing edge is still there, but there's an underlying vein of seriousness in his words.

I sigh. "Yeah, ok. Be careful for me too then, I guess. And I'll help in any way I can, but… Obviously we've got shit to do. Warlords to fight and whatnot." Honestly if I could just chain his ass to a chair in a little safe room I'd feel leagues better, but oh well.

Ace is quiet for a second. “Can I give you my Transponder number?” he suddenly blurts. I pull away from him to blink up at his nervous face. His freckled cheeks go red. “In case I need more information or you find something — I don’t know. Please say something so I can stop talking.”

I can’t help it. I burst out laughing in his face. His cheeks get redder and I swear to god his body temperature rises exponentially. “I’m sorry! No, it’s just, I was gonna ask for your number anyways you nerd!” I gasp.

Ace starts shaking me by the shoulders. “You could have led with that! Don’t laugh when I’m being sentimental!” he grumbles.

I try my best to reign in my cackles. “Alright you greasy fuck, we’ll exchange numbers and I’ll call you when this shitshow is over, how’s that?” I say with a big smile. He gives me one right back. “Also we should probably go back over there so they stop thinking whatever the hell it is they’re thinking,” I add.

Because the rest of the crew has not stopped staring at our weird display for a single second. God knows what’s going through their heads.

“Why does your navigator look so disgusted?” he asks incredulously. And she really does. She’s looking back and forth between the two of us like she’s trying her damn best to unconnected some dots in her head. Zoro has a similar look.

“If I had to guess, I’d say she thinks you’re hitting on me,” I snort.

Ace whips his head back to me with a horrified look on his face. “Am I?! Are *you?!”*

I burst out laughing again. “No you goddamn moron! Even if I wasn’t aromantic I simply *wouldn’t,* not that you aren’t smoking hot because you are, but it would just be *weird.* Not to mention you’ve spent half this trip staring at Sanji’s, admittedly amazing, ass!”

Through my rant his face gets progressively redder and I'm honestly getting concerned he may burst a blood vessel or just plain burst into flames.

"I'm allowed to look! I'll actually break your ankle this time, I mean it," he threatens. The intimidation factor is pretty much lost because of the smoke coming out of his ears, and it sends me into further hysterics.

Ace hooks an arm around my shoulders and starts dragging me back to the group while grumbling under his breath. I cannot for the life of me stop cackling.

Ace stomps right up to Luffy. "Gimmie that back for a second," he says, snatching his vivre card out of Luffy's hands. He tears the sheet in half and pulls a pen out of who knows where, then scribbles a number out and slaps it onto my face the same time he slaps the other half back at Luffy.

Giggles keep slipping out of my mouth unbidden as I take the pen and write my number on his arm. "You call me if you ever get lonely," I wheeze, wiggling my eyebrows. "Or if you need a booty call."

Both Nami, Zoro and Sanji make wounded sounds and recoil like they've been physically hit while Ace starts laughing in my face. "What's a booty call?" Luffy asks, tilting his head. Me and Ace both start laughing louder.

"Not another one!" Sanji wails. "You brothers! Stop seducing Ed!"

"You need to be stopped!" Zoro shouts, shaking his fist at me.

"I also don't know what that is," Chopper states. Nami's face drops and she shoves her hands over his eyes.

"You are a bad influence on children!" she hisses at the pair of us. We both basically collapse on each other in hysterics.

Luffy looks back and forth between us before grinning. “I’m glad you guys get along!” he announces.

Ace lets out another laugh, then composes himself. He shoots us both meaningful looks. “You sure y’all don’t wanna join the Whitebeards?” he asks one last time.

I scoff. “Please, I have to stay as far away from that man as I can. He’ll smell my daddy issues from a nautical mile away and I won’t be able to escape the forceful adoption. So no fucking thank you.”

Ace throws his head back and laughs. “You’ve got me there!” he points at me and Luffy, “take care of each other!” We both offer thumbs up. “Well, best of luck to you losers, have fun fighting Crocodile!” he cheers as he starts jogging away from us waving both his arms.

We all wave back. “Good luck to you too! Don’t be stupid!” Luffy hollers.

“Make good choices, you dumbfuck!” I yell, a middle finger hoisted high. There’s a slap sound as Nami slams her hands over Chopper's eyes again, a scandalized look thrown at me.

Ace flips his middle finger right back. “Only if you do!” he hollers, then he bursts off the sandy ground in a blast of flames. We watch him streak off until he’s nothing but a spec in the distance.

“Not to be dramatic but I think I’m in love with your brother,” I state. Everyone around me chokes.

Luffy laughs, taking me by the hand and marching into the desert. “No you aren’t. Let’s go!”

“Hate to see him leave, love to watch him go!” I sing.

———

“Ed, do you need someone to carry you?” Nami asks a good chunk into our trek, not bothering to look up from where she’s sewing Ace’s vivre card into Luffy’s hat atop Eyelash the camel. (She said “I trust you not to lose whatever it is, but not him,” and I wasn’t about to argue.)

“Nah,” I say, shaking my head and flicking some sweat off my arms, “ankle’s actually fine, surprisingly.” You gotta love the bullshit power of anime optimism and pure spite.

“That’s not how injuries work,” Chopper says disappointedly.

I shrug. “Life is bullshit and so is everything else. The laws of the universe only apply to people who care about them.” Chopper stares up at me with stars in his wide eyes. Should I feel bad about encouraging wack ass beliefs in this kid? Nah.

“We should be arriving in Yuba today, late afternoon if we make good time and evening if we don’t,” Vivi comments, eyes on the horizon.

“Or,” I start, “better idea. We go straight to Rainbase and skip Yuba entirely.”

Vivi shoots me a glare over her shoulder. “Would you cut that out? We are going to Yuba.”

I glare back. “Yuh huh. And if that ends up being pointless?” She makes a huffy grunt and faces back forward. I cast a glance around at the rest of our group, who all seem content to ignore me. I scoff under my breath. “Call me Cassandra I guess.”

“Who?” Usopp, who had been walking the closest to me, asks.

“Cassandra,” I repeat. “She was a prophet who was cursed to speak the truth, but have no one ever believe her.” She made me sad as fuck. Her life was very… frustrating.

“Yeah, ok. Prophet, got it,” he says sarcastically. I shoot him a soft glare and he rolls his eyes.

“You’ve got a scorpion on your shoulder.” I say snootily, speeding up to walk ahead of him as he starts freaking out and smacking at his clothes.

_____

“Let’s skip Yuba,” I say completely unprompted. I’m met with groans from every single one of my companions.

“Ed, please knock it off,” Nami pleads.

I raise my hands. “I’m just saying—”

“Stop saying *anything!* I hear one more complaint out of you, I’m burying your ass in a sand dune!” she hollers.

“Consider this; I’m presenting the better option,” I snark. I am sick and fucking tired of dry heat and sand in my eyes and nobody listening to me—

“Ed, just shut up,” Vivi snaps. “You’re not being helpful. You haven’t been helpful this entire trip!”

Yeowch. “That’s a little far,” Usopp mutters to my left.

Vivi heaves a frustrated breath. “Sorry. But if you aren't going to do anything useful like, oh I don’t know, stopping the guy that has the King’s, my *father’s,* face from gallivanting around the ship I might just lighten up!”

I throw my head back and groan. “You’re still on about that? God, let it go!” I send her a scathing glare before shrugging at the sky. “Besides, where I’m from we have a tendency to behead our kings. Be glad this is only defamation.”

Usopp takes a sharp intake of breath at my side as Vivi whirls around with a furious look. “You—!” she cuts herself off with frustrated sounds that claw right out of the back of her throat. “Stop undermining my choices! I am going to speak with the rebels!”

I glower at her and raise my chin. “And if the rebels in Yuba decide to kill you because of who you are and what you represent? God! It’s like your own life means less than nothing to you!”

Seriously, there’s a fine line between selfless and self sacrifice and this crazy bitch is throwing herself right over it!

Vivi opens her mouth to retort before snapping it shut with an audible click, glare still firmly in place. Nami grabs her by the shoulder and forcefully spins her back around. “Not cool, Ed,” she snaps, urging Eyelash forward.

Usopp hesitates. “That was a bit much,” he mumbles.

I hiss out a breath and start digging in my bag for my jerky I bought in Nanohana. “Sorry. The heat’s getting to me.”

He raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “Obviously. I’ve never seen you this wound up.”

I glare at the sand and rip a bite off my jerky. “Deserts are the worst biome. They’re worse than *swamps* . I can feel myself becoming evil.”

“You’re being too goddamn dramatic,” Zoro mutters from my right.

I offer him a piece of my jerky that he shakes his head at. “5,000 berri the rebels aren’t even *in* Yuba anymore,” I grumble.

Zoro shoots me a look. “You’re being an asshole.”

I shoot him a look back. “I’m being *pragmatic* . You should try it.”

Luffy snatches my jerky right from my hand with his teeth. “I didn’t know you were pregnant,” he says through chewing.

I smack him on the back of the head. *“Pragmatic!* Who the fuck would have gotten me pregnant?!”

He shrugs. I glare at him. Zoro and Usopp snicker.

_____

It’s just past sunset by the time Vivi tells us we’re almost there. The evening sky is obscured by the blowing sand, nothing but the distant light of Yuba guiding our path.

“Something’s wrong,” Vivi says slowly.

Indeed, the closer we get it’s clear that Yuba is being not only hit by a sandstorm, but outright attacked by it. Vivi looks horrified. She jumps off Eyelash and races ahead of us to clear the last dune in between us and the oasis.

We follow her and by the time we get to the outskirts, the sandstorm has all but vanished. Vivi looks around the sand littered streets with pain, fear and frustration seeping out her pores.

“No, no, no…” she mutters, peeking into abandoned homes and stepping over bent and snapped palm trees. “This can’t be it!” she grits out, hands clenched into her robe.

“This place looks no different from Erumalu. Damn,” Zoro grumbles under his breath.

Luffy sticks his tongue out. “Water!” he groans.

“Vivi, isn’t this place supposed to be an oasis?” Sanji questions, hands in his pockets.

“The sand has swallowed up the oasis..!” she hisses, breath coming heavy and despair setting into her expression.

Usopp pinches my arm and shoots me a look that says ‘keep your mouth shut.’ I oblige.

The rhythmic scraping of a shovel reaches our ears. “You travellers..? You must be exhausted from your trip through the desert,” a voice, rough from the sand, calls from a dip in the ground. Down inside is a man, dusty and ragged. He continues to shovel as he calls up again, “I’m afraid the town’s a little dried up… But you’re still free to rest here. We don’t have much in the way of water, but we have plenty of inns. It’s what our town was known for, afterall!”

Vivi tugs her robe up over her face as he throws us with a smile under a bushy moustache over his shoulder. “Excuse me… But we heard the rebels were based here..?” she questions hesitantly.

The man ceases his shovelling to turn to us with a glare instead of the welcoming look. “What do you want with the rebel army?! Don’t tell me you want to join those hooligans!” he yells, throwing whatever he can get his hands on at us. I duck under a huge barrel that smacks square into Luffy’s face. The man stops, then turns back to his shovelling with a sigh. “Those fools… They aren’t here anymore,” he grunts.

Everyone chokes. “WHAAAT?!” Luffy screams. I throw my hands up and turn to walk out a circle before I say something uncalled for.

“That sandstorm just now… It wasn’t the first to hit this town. They’ve been steadily increasing in frequency for the last three years. With that and the drought, the oasis has been eaten away to what you see now,” the man explains solemnly. “Without the flow of supplies, the rebel army was forced to relocate. They’re in Katorea now.”

Vivi drops her shawl and her jaw drops open. “Katorea?!”

“Where’s that? Vivi, is that close?” Luffy questions. I groan loudly and shove my face into my hands.

“It’s an oasis next to Nanohana,” she replies, face scrunched up and defeated as she throws me a desperate glance.

“So this really was for nothing?” Zoro grumbles, shooting me a look that says ‘don’t be fucking insufferable.’

I don’t pay it heed. “Gee, wow, it’s almost like I *was right!”* I yell, pacing out another lap so I don’t actually fucking snap and hit someone. I can feel the urge bubbling up under my skin and bite down on my lip.

“Did you say Vivi..?” the man interrupts, staggering up the hole.

“Wait, she's not a princess!” Luffy yells frantically. Zoro smacks him on the back of the head with a hiss.

“Vivi? Is that really you?!” the man whispers, coming up and taking Vivi by the shoulders. She hesitates for a second before her eyes widen. “I’m so glad you’re alive! I don’t suppose you recognize me, I did lose some weight!” he laughs, tears springing into his eyes.

“...Mr. Toto?!” Vivi gasps, a hand clasped over her mouth. The tears began to stream down his face as he nods enthusiastically. “You..!” she whines, looking horrified by the state he’s in.

“Listen to me, Vivi! I believe in the King! He would never betray our country..!” Toto exclaims right in her face. “This rebellion is absurd! So please… Please! Stop those fools!” He collapses to his knees, gnarled hands clutched into Vivi’s robe. “You’re the only one who can do it! So what that it hasn’t rained in three years..? I still have faith in His Majesty, as most of the country does! I’ve tried to stop them so many times… But they just won't listen!” he cries. “The rebellion won’t stop! They plan to end things with the next attack! They’re prepared to *die!”* Toto bows his head and clasps his hands together. “Please Vivi, stop them before it’s too late!”

Vivi is still for a moment. Then she’s crouching down and offering Toto a handkerchief. “Mr. Toto,” she begins, knees in the sand. “We can stop the rebellion,” she announces with a bright smile on her dirty face.

It’s a fragile sort of confidence. It speaks to how thin she’s stretched, and how brittle her hope is. Toto doesn’t seem to see any of that. I clench my fists in my pockets as the crew exchanges looks around me.

Toto starts to wail. “Thank you..! Thank you Vivi..!”

Chapter End Notes

Ed🤝Vivi🤝Ace - Not considering themselves and being self sacrificing idiots

I've finally fished writing everything for the Alabasta saga and y'all... The last two chapters of this arc are both 5k... So look forward to that ig.

The snappening approaches.

Chapter 35: Chapter Thirty Five: Now I Know How Joan Of Arc Felt

Chapter Summary

Bigmouth Strikes Again - The Smiths

"Today sucked," I grumble, resting my chin on my folded arms and glaring into the sand. Luffy hums.

Chapter Notes

I call this chapter 'Conflict'.

I kept trying to find a place to make a Jeanne D. Arc joke but I just couldn't do it.

Final time I remind y'all I really like Vivi. I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We shack up in a big room in one of the various inns. Toto wasn't kidding when he said this place was famous for them; there were literal fucktons to choose from.

"Good work today guys! Lets hit the hay and get some well deserved rest, ok? We'll need our strength for tomorrow!" Usopp sings as he tucks himself into one of the beds.

Zoro hurls a pillow at his head. "You've been nothing but lazy this whole trip!" he shouts.

"Don't compare me to you monsters, of course I was tired!" Usopp shouts back, throwing his own pillow and nailing Zoro in the face.

"You..!" Zoro grunts, ducking under the next pillow he throws, which ends up smacking Chopper so hard he falls over.

“You win today's award for laziness though, Blue-Nose!” Usopp hollers.

Chopper jumps to his feet and points a hoof at Usopp. “I’m covered in *fur!* Of course I can’t stand the heat!” I smother my groans into my hands, collapsing onto one of the beds.

“What do you have to be tired for?! You got carried all of yesterday!” Usopp yells, clocking me in the head with a pillow and sending me sprawling over the floor.

I lay there for a long moment, a strangled scream hissing between my teeth, slowly getting louder as I get to my feet and stomp outside.

The cool night air blesses my face as the yelling picks up inside. I slam the door shut and march over to where Luffy is crouched watching Toto dig. He looks up at me with his big eyes as I slump down next to him and tuck my knees up with a huff.

“Today sucked,” I grumble, resting my chin on my folded arms and glaring into the sand. Luffy hums.

There's nothing but the sounds of the scraping shovel for a moment. “Hey Ed,” Luffy says suddenly, “do you like Ace better than me?”

My surprise wipes the glare from my face. I turn to look at Luffy's relaxed judgement free face. “Why the hell would you ask that?” I blurt incredulously.

He shrugs. “Dunno. Just thought I’d ask.”

I snort, gaze returning to the sand. I reach one of my hands over and hook my pinkie into his. “I don’t like anybody better than I like you,” I tell him honestly. “When I was falling out of the sky and thought I was gonna die, my last thought was of you.”

Luffy hums again. “Sorry this adventure has kinda sucked for you,” he says.

I sigh, pinkie tightening on his. “Don’t worry about it, Captain. I’m partially to blame for how miserable I’ve been. I just…” I furrow my brow at the ground, “this was disappointing. And could have been avoided if you guys listened to me.”

We return to silence.

“I’ll listen to you more,” Luffy promises.

I send him an amused look. “More? Not all the time?”

He shakes his head with a smile. “Nah. We won't always agree, so I’ll do my own thing sometimes. But I trust your judgement so I’ll always at least hear you out.”

I let out a soft laugh. Emotionally intelligent asshole.

“Hey old guy, is it hard to live here without water?” Luffy calls down to Toto.

Toto gives him a hoarse laugh. “Yuba cannot be defeated by mere sand! This land was given to me by the King, so I’ll keep digging the oasis out every time!” he says determinedly.

Luffy lets go of my finger to hop down into the hole. He squats down and starts digging up the sand like a dog. “Ok! Let’s dig!”

I throw my head back to laugh as Toto starts yelling at Luffy for throwing all the sand into his hole. “I’m going back inside now!” I call down to them. Luffy throws me a thumbs up and a grin as he keeps digging.

Going back into our inn room, things have calmed down considerably, and it's notably missing two of its occupants. I raise my eyebrow. "Where'd the girls go?"

Usopp, now sporting the beginnings of a black eye and a sizable lump on his head, speaks up. "We may have gotten a little carried away, and they may have yelled at us and moved to a different room."

I bark out a laugh, snatching a discarded pillow and flopping onto a free bed. "You guys are damn idiots."

Zoro shoots me a glare. "You specifically don't get to call us idiots."

I roll my eyes. "I've been nothing but brilliant since we met."

"We both know that's not true," he grouches back.

I turn on the bed to actually glare at him. "Uh, isn't it? Name one thing I've been wrong about. Including the rebels not being here and this being a huge waste of time!"

Zoro sits up on his bed. "Stop acting like you're always right," he snaps.

Anger pools in my gut and I let it take over my face. "But I *was* this time! And none of you fucking listened to me!" I snap back.

"You don't have to rub it in!" Usopp bites out.

I twist my fingers into the fabric of my pants. "I'm not! But you guys keep doing this! You *never* listen to me! Fucking *nobody* does!"

The entirety of the Baratie trip into Arlong park was the same — whether it was random people or my crew, someone was always questioning what I said despite any evidence I gave them that I was right.

"You mean your dumb theories and that stupid guess you made on the ship you decided to cling to despite it being nothing but that, a guess? It doesn't matter that it ended up being true, you had no idea the rebels actually wouldn't be here!" Zoro shouts.

I glare harder. "Guess?! You know how I knew I was right? Because I was fucking thinking! Crocodile has been hitting this place with sandstorms long before we got here, and he's clearly moving ahead with his plan! It's common sense that he would take the opportunity to drive the rebels out of here to spur them into action!"

"Um, Ed—" Chopper says quietly.

I cut him off to keep yelling. "Behold! A perfectly reasonable and comprehensible explanation of evidence to support my *guess!* Fucking watch, Vivi is gonna want us all to trek back to Nanohana in the morning to keep chasing this bullshit lead because she doesn't know when to fucking quit and choose a different course of action!"

Frustration is working its way through each muscle and every nerve in my body. My hands are shaking so hard where they're clenched it's making my knees knock together. I think Sanji says something from my right but I pay it no heed.

Zoro stands up from his bed, towering over me with a scowl. "Get off your high fucking horse! You explained precisely none of those details every single time you brought it up!"

I can feel the frustrated tears starting to fight their way into my eyes. This is why I couldn't do debate, I cry whenever I argue too hard. "I gave good reasons! *Multiple* times! You never asked me further about anything, you just brushed me off!"

I'm trying to take deep breaths to keep my eyes dry, which isn't working great because I can feel the speed of them beckoning a panic attack, while Zoro takes a step forward. "It's not my

fault you're so shit at communicating! Why couldn't you just express yourself like a normal person!" he shouts.

And that does it. The tears break free, gushing out my eyes and down my cheeks as I crush my eyelids together and hunch forward. And I scream, "I WOULD IF YOU WOULD FUCKING *LISTEN TO ME!"*

There's sounds of bedsprings and I think more of Zoro's voice accompanied by Chopper and Usopp, before a pair of gentle hands are placed on top of mine.

I suck in a couple harsh breaths, eyes snapping open to meet Sanji's. He gives me a soft smile, working my fingers out of my pants and massaging the palms. "Hey, it's ok. Take a deep breath." I let out a wordless sob. "Ah, shhh, it's ok. C'mon, with me," he encourages, taking one of my hands and placing it over his chest while taking exaggerated breaths.

Another sob rattles my lungs as I attempt to follow his lead, more tears spilling out unbidden. His other hand comes and soothes across my cheek. "M'sorry," I gasp, "don't be mad."

Something crumples in Sanji's eye. "It's ok. Nobody's mad, I promise," he murmurs, thumb rubbing circles into my hand.

I whine high in my throat. "No. He's right. M'being an asshole. M'sorry."

His mouth pinches. "No you're not. You were both just upset. I promise we'll listen to what you have to say once you get your breathing even."

I attempt several lung quaking breaths that send more tears over my lashline, and Sanji encourages me through each of them. I couldn't say how long it takes for me to get my breathing under control, but when I do, it's Sanji's prized hands that wipe the remnants of tears from my tender face.

I lift my eyes past him to where the rest of the boys are. Zoro is sat on the bed looking off to the side, vaguely guilty, with Usopp laid across his lap like he's keeping him there. Chopper, in his big form, is stood beside them watching me and Sanji with a concerned look.

I take a deep breath. "Sorry. I shouldn't have yelled, it's been a bad week," I mumble quietly.

"I'm sorry too, I was being snappy," Usopp offers. Then he elbows Zoro in the side with a pointed glare.

Zoro grunts and gives me a short glance before he looks back off to the side with a softend look. "...I'm also sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel like shit. Or cry," he says lamely.

Sanji brings my attention back to him, still kneeling in front of me with his hands on mine. "Going forward, let's keep this in mind. We'll do better to listen to you, and you do better to tell us when you're frustrated before it boils over into something like this again. Everyone agree?"

We all make confirming mumbles back. Chopper shrinks down to his normal form and scuttles over to me. "Are you ok? You're supposed to drink lots of water after a panic attack, but since we don't have a lot you can have mine—"

I cut him off by placing my hand on his head. "Don't you worry about that, Chopper."

It doesn't shake his concern. "Do you have those often? Are you on medication? Do I need to start stocking some up?" he rattles off rapid fire.

I smoosh his hat further down his head. "Probably should have mentioned this earlier, since you're the doctor and all, but I have a panic disorder. I haven't been on medication for it since I was fourteen though, none of the stuff we tried ever really stuck. Most of it made it worse, actually."

His eyes bug out. “You’ve had a diagnosed disorder this whole time and didn’t *tell me?!”* he screeches.

I give him a nervous chuckle. “I suppose I should almost mention I have depression and ADHD? Got diagnosed with all three when I was twelve. I’m kind of a walking disaster.”

Chopper smothers a scream in his hooves.

I give him another smile and gently shove him towards his bed. “How about we just sleep this off so we have energy for tomorrow, hm? Doubtlessly there’s a conversation that needs to be had about our course.”

And I am very much not looking forward to any talk with Vivi about this topic anytime soon.

I shoot a meaningful look at Zoro, who scrunches his nose at me. “I want 6,000 berri on that Nanohana thing, by the way.”

“It’s fine. If you try not to fly off the handle when explaining shit to her it’ll work out. And you’ll have us to back you up. We’re friends, aren’t we?” Zoro mutters, tossing Usopp off himself.

I blink at him. Kureha’s voice rings through my head.

“You call those boys lots of things, but you’ve yet to call them friends.”

I let a smile slowly spread across my face. “Yeah,” I say, awe slipping into my tone, “friends.”

Zoro gives me a weird look and Sanji starts laughing while rising to his feet. I tug his ass back down to my level and roll across the bed, dragging him with me. He yelps as I wrap my

arms and legs around him like an octopus. “You’re ass is staying with me tonight. Non negotiable!” I proclaim.

He makes some weird noises before he throws his arms and me and starts rolling around. “Whatever you want Ed! You can use me as a pillow if you need!” he sings.

I laugh and bury my stinging cheeks in his shirt.

_____

The next day comes bright and early. After Luffy receives his water from Toto, Vivi sets off to the edge of town from the direction we came. She makes it to the outskirts and into the sandy ground of the desert before I stop her.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

She stops short, then slowly turns to face me. “To Katorea. That’s where the rebels are,” she says just as slowly. I hear Nami make a warning sound behind me.

“No,” I say calmly.

Her face, as it has a lot recently, drops into a scowl. “What do you mean, *no?”*

I keep my face neutral. “I mean no. We aren’t backtracking and losing two days we don’t have so you can scratch this itch.”

That just makes her angrier. “I’m not just scratching an itch! I’m trying to stop a rebellion from destroying my country! In case you forgot, the rebels are ready to die in the next fight!” she shouts, fists clenched.

“Which is why we should go to Rainbase,” I reply, still deadfaced as she gets more worked up.

“Ed knock it off!” Nami snaps.

Zoro grabs her by the elbow. “Let them talk,” he demands. She blinks up at him before turning her eyes back to us.

“Are you trying to get this country destroyed?! Is this some absurd payback on me?!” Vivi demands, volume raising as she takes a step towards me.

“If you don’t stop yelling at me, we’re gonna have a problem,” I say coldly.

Usopp makes a sound behind me. “Ed, not that I’m not totally 100% with you because I am, but maybe hold the threats? She *is* a princess—”

“And we’re fucking pirates,” I cut him off, “royal status means less than null to us. If she doesn’t stop to consider the bigger picture instead of every individual life in this country, all our already wasted effort will be for nothing.”

She growls under her breath. “Stop considering their lives..? What the hell are you talking about?!”

“You expect no one to die in this fight with a million people? That’s naive,” Luffy pipes up, expression blank as the group turns to him in shock.

Vivi’s face scrunches up. “What’s wrong with not wanting people to die?!” she demands.

Luffy stares her down, face still unnerving blank. “People die,” he states. I think of Sabo, and what exactly Luffy must be thinking about right now.

When I see Vivi lunge forward to hit Luffy, I don't hesitate. I snatch her fist in a crushing grip and throw it aside. "That's it!" I snap. And I tackle her.

My friends start yelling around me and I slam Vivi into the ground by her shoulders. "Stop acting like an idiot!" I yell into her face. "Take some goddamn advice and stop with this single minded bullshit!" Then I punch her across the jaw. "And don't raise your fists against my *Captain!"*

She pushes back against my hold, wiggling an arm between us to throw a punch at my face. It glances off my cheek, but throws me off long enough for her to roll us over and switch our positions. "Oh *that* was your breaking point?! And who's advice, yours?! You've been nothing but a jackass since we met!" she screams into my face, throwing another punch that connects solidly with my nose and forces my head to the side.

I hook my left leg out over her left side and kick us into rolling again, then slam my elbow into her chest and backhand her across the face with my other hand. "Maybe, but I'm a jackass who isn't gonna let you lose your fucking country!" I holler.

She bares her teeth, wild eyed, and lets poison run out of her mouth. "Just because you were *pathetic* enough to lose your home doesn't mean I will too!" she bellows.

I recoil like she hit me again. My friends let out more gasps and shouts around us. Vivi takes my momentary retreat as an opportunity to grab me by the front of my shirt and force us into one more roll.

Once she's on top of me, she throws punch after punch at my stunned face. There's a sickening crunch of cartilage on the third or fourth hit that brings tears to my eyes. I just let it happen. My head jerks back and forth countless times before Vivi is being hauled back off me by Zoro.

He has this truly scandalized look on his face. Sanji looks much the same, with Usopp a close comparison. Nami is looking back and forth between us mortified while Chopper hides behind her legs. Luffy is stood with his hands clenched into his robe and his lip between his teeth.

I struggle into a sitting position before Sanji is rushing over to support me. “Fuck my home,” I growl, hand over my blood gushing nose. “Fuck it, you hear me?! It doesn’t matter! But your home is still right here! And all you have to do to save it is make a good goddamn decision!”

I notice the tears running down Vivi’s face as she struggles against Zoro’s hold. “You wanna help your country? You wanna save it? Then let’s fucking destroy Crocodile!” I yell. “You wanna sacrifice yourself to stop this?! Your life isn’t enough! We’ll *all* shoulder that cost if you want! Because we’re goddamn *friends!”* Vivi goes limp against Zoro. I turn to my Captain, who honestly looked a second away from jumping Vivi as well a moment ago. “Anything to add, Captain?!”

He lowers the brim of his hat. “Nah. You said it perfectly fine.”

Sanji helps me to my feet and Vivi furiously wipes at her cheeks.

Nami hesitates for a long moment before she marches over and pushes the both of us into sitting on the ground. “You two are going to talk this out like civilized people now,” she demands. “If I hear any yelling or a single aggressive action, I’ll bury you both myself!”

With that threat, she grabs all the boys and drags them away from us.

We sit in silence for a long moment. Sand blows off the ground around us and I lick some blood off my upper lip.

“My mom used to always say I couldn’t get along with people who were too similar to me,” I start. Vivi, who had just been staring into the sand, gives me a questioning look. “I was so sure that wasn’t what was happening here, but god…” I sigh. “Vivi, you’re so important. And you treat your life like it’s fucking worthless. You can’t fathom having anything to give aside from your life. We’re…” I hesitate, “...the same, like that. I’m fully aware I was being pushy and not explaining myself enough to you.”

There's another long silence.

"...Sorry I've been such a jerk," Vivi says quietly. "What I just said about your home… That was entirely unforgivable." She buries her face in her arms. "I don't think you're pathetic in the slightest. In fact…" her eyes dart to me and back to the ground, "I guess you just made me feel… like all my efforts were wasted. Two years of deep cover and you managed to do more and better in minutes while drugged out of your mind! You're really incredible, Ed. I guess I should have just… appreciated your skills instead of trying to measure up to them."

I stay quiet for a second. Guilt eats at my stomach. "I'm not actually that great. And I'm sorry, too. I just kept retaliating and reacting to the shit you were throwing at me, and throwing it back twice as hard. It's on me for not trying to understand things from your point of view," I pause, "for what it's worth, I think you'll make an amazing queen one day."

Vivi whips her head up to me, shock clear in her wide eyes. "No! I…" she hesitates, "there… There was a moment after we left Little Garden where I genuinely entertained the thought of leaving you to your fate. Someone… someone who would do that to someone helping them isn't fit to be a ruler."

I scoff. "We hadn't even known each other for a week, and I was an asshole the whole time. I definitely would have actually tried to kill me, you're a goddamn saint for making the choice you did, Vives. Especially in your situation."

She's quiet for a second. "…Vives, huh? I get a nickname now?" she murmurs, soft smile hidden as she rests her head on her knees.

I laugh softly. "Yeah, nickname privileges acquired." I side eye her for a second. "...You wanna hug it out..?"

She looks at me surprised before shyly nodding. I grin and open my arms wide. She slowly inches forward before I'm pulling her in and she gasps. She all but melts in my arms at the contact.

Ace was fucking right and he's gonna be an insufferable prick about it. I can just feel it.

“You’re a pretty great friend, Ed,” Vivi mumbles into my shoulder. I snicker, lowering my face into her robe. Then I hiss as pain shoots up my face. “Are you ok?” she asks frantically, pulling back.

I groan. “Aw shit, sorry. I got blood on your robe. *Fuuuuck!* You definitely broke my nose. I gotta get Chopper on this stat,” I laugh through my mouth, licking more blood off my mouth. “You have a mean right hook! My compliments to the chef!”

She smothers her own groan into her hands and leans her forehead on my shoulder.

Worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Yaaaaay reconciliation!! Writing Vivi being mean hurt but for the plot… Eh. It's over now so rejoice.

Luffy and Ed are on opposite ends of the Emotional intelligence — Practical intelligence spectrum and I love that for them.

Finally the gang can move onto fighting and getting hurt by people who aren't each other!

Chapter 36: Chapter Thirty Six: Gold Crocodiles, They Snap Their Teeth On Your Cigarette

Chapter Summary

Walk Like an Egyptian - The Bangles

I hop to my feet. “Ok! Let’s go, fuckers! I wanna be gambling by nightfall!” I holler, arms in the air.

Chapter Notes

Obligatory Walk Like an Egyptian chapter. You know I had to do it to 'em.

Today was my last day of work before school starts! The best part of my job was that I could just have free shit all the time and as my last act of legal thievery I have acquired a glass that looks like it was shot with a bullet. I think it is very cool.

AAAAAAHHH OP LIVE ACTION TOMORROW
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“FUCK!” I yell as my nose is snapped back into place with a crunch.

Chopper (big so he can use his opposable thumbs, keratin does *not* set noses well) gives me an apologetic look. “Sorry, Ed. But it’s better to set your nose now than later! It’ll be fine now, I swear. Please stop getting hurt before we actually start the fighting.”

I give the doc a thumbs up, wiping a stray tear from my eye. “I’m so sorry,” Vivi mumbles, cheeks red.

I smile at her even though it makes my nose burn while Chopper gently puts a bandage across it. “Screw your slasher things, we gotta get you a pair of brass knuckles!” I cackle.

Her face gets redder while Nami pats her on the back. “We need to get moving to Rainbase. It should be another day of travel if we don’t delay any further,” Vivi says, changing the subject.

Luffy, who had been running away from Usopp to keep his water safe, trots over and gets right up in Vivi’s face. “Once I whoop Crocodile’s ass, I want a feast!” he demands.

Vivi blinks before smiling. “Okay. I promise!”

I hop to my feet. “Ok! Let’s go, fuckers! I wanna be gambling by nightfall!” I holler, arms in the air.

“Gambling?” Usopp asks incredulously while Zoro defensively puts his hands on his coin purse.

“Rainbase is a gambling town,” Vivi explains.

“Gambling? You don’t say?” Nami asks, an audible ka-ching sounding as her eyes light up.

“7,000 of those berri you’re guarding that Crocodile is hiding in a casino,” I snicker at Zoro.

“That’s actually very likely. Crocodile runs a casino there called Rain Dinners,” Vivi adds with a smile

Zoro’s face drops. “Yeah, no dice. Those are shit odds even for me.”

I give Vivi this betrayed look. “Dude? We just made up, don’t make me hit you again for costing me money.”

She slaps a hand over her mouth. “I’m *so* sorry.”

_____

We don’t make it to Rainbase by nightfall, unfortunately. We’re forced to make camp at what Vivi estimates to be a few hours away.

While we’re lounging around the campfire, Nami turns to Usopp. “So how’s it coming along? You finished it yet?”

Usopp finishes cleaning off his plate and flashes her a smug smile. “Oh, it’s finished alright. Behold! The Clima-Tact!” he announces, brandishing a bunch of bright blue pipe segments.

Nami raises an eyebrow. “Clima-Tact? That’s what you went with?”

Usopp huffs. “I think it’s very innovative. Anyways the attacks and functions change based on how you arrange them. I can show you the basics and I also have some written instructions, just in case.”

“Fucking memorize that shit. Having a weapon you can’t control or don’t understand is worse than having no weapon at all,” I pipe up, tearing through a third round of dinner.

Nami and Usopp both look at me vexed. “That was oddly insightful and profound,” Nami mutters.

“You didn’t know how to reload your gun until you met me,” Usopp says dead faced.

I choke on my food. “Shut up! I was good enough to intimidate Klahadore or whatever so I was good enough!” I yell, face hot.

“Is your rod thing safe? Don’t go giving Nami dangerous shit!” Sanji shouts, plating the last of the food and offering it up. Both me and Luffy lunge for it at the same time, and I kick him in the head with absolutely zero remorse to get it first.

“Besides,” Sanji starts, completely ignoring our stupidity, “Nami, Vivi and Ed don’t have to fight! I’ll protect them! Just call me Prince hahaha!” The smoke drifting off his cigarette is making actual sparkles for him.

Was his ass even trying to hide that shit?

Zoro makes a face. “Prince. Uh huh.”

Sanji’s own face sours. “Shut the hell up, damnit!”

I smack Zoro on the shoulder and give Sanji a bright smile. “As very clearly demonstrated, some of us are very good at violence. And if you try to stop us from fighting you'll be the one with a broken nose. But yes, you are incredibly regal.”

His expression shifts through a variety of conflicting expressions, ranging from happy, scared and just a bare hint of disgust. I lift a forkful of food to my mouth only to find my plate empty. I whip my head back to glare at Luffy, who’s licking his lips and looking anywhere but me.

“Stop playing into his fantasy,” Zoro grumbles.

“Just because you landed three steps too far from being a white knight doesn't mean you have to be salty,” I fire back. “Anyway, we should really be prepared for what awaits us in Rainbase.”

The rest of the group straightens and tunes into the conversation on that cue. “I doubt all of the officer agents are still there, but we should still be wary of them. Not to mention Miss All-Sunday. The big conflict we’re hoping to avoid is probably going to take place in Alubarna, and I’d put money on Crocodile having a trump card there.”

I give Vivi an intense look. “If you can find someone close to you father that you trust, you should have them on the lookout for a bomb or something similar in the capital. Somewhere with ample space but still discreet. Like a clock tower or something.” She gives me a determined nod. “Honestly, if anyone who isn’t Luffy finds Crocodile first, fucking book it. Luffy, are you willing to hear some advice?” I direct my question at my Captain.

He seems to think for a second before shrugging. “Yeah, sure.”

I nod. “Great. Crocodile’s a logia, like Ace and Smoker. That means you aren’t gonna be able to hit him unless you find a work around. Like, Ace is great, but if you douse him in water the guy’s fucked. Something like that. In general sea water is always my suggestion, but not realistically an option here.”

Luffy blinks twice at me. “What?”

There’s the resounding sound of palms meeting heads.

I groan and swipe a hand down my face. “I don’t know why I expected any of that to get through to you. Spit on him before you hit him, how about that?”

That registers clearly. His face lights up. “Gross! You got it!” He throws his head back and yells at the sky, “CROCODILE, YOUR ASS IS GRASS!”

Nami smacks me on the leg. “That's so stupid. Will that actually work?”

I shrug. “Maybe? I don’t know. It’s *Luffy* , something stupid may just be the solution.”

Nami stares for a second before her expression drops. “Unfortunately I think that’s true.”

I turn to Vivi. “Anything to add, Vives?”

She blinks at me for a second. “No, I think you covered everything. Your information will guide us through this!” she says with a bright smile.

I give her a long stare. “Information shimformation. I’m asking for your input.”

She blinks again, before her face seems to light up. “Well, I think it'll be best if we do something similar to what we did in Nanohana, having a small group or one person getting us supplies until we can go to confront Crocodile for real. It’s important we remember Baroque Works’ specialty as assassins, and the agents they’ll doubtlessly have in the city.” Her face sours for a second at the thought. “I would like to avoid the Alubarna conflict, if at all possible. If we can take Crocodile down here and now, it’ll be all the better when we need to stop the rebels,” she continues, eye casting off into the desert night.

I nod with a grin. “Sounds like a plan. I’d like to go ahead and scout out the casino while you guys run errands, if that’s alright.”

There’s nods from all around. Luffy scrunches his nose like he’s thinking too hard. “Hmmm… As long as you don’t go finishing off Croc all by yourself. I wanna hit him too.”

I laugh and ruffle his hair. “You don’t have to worry about that, I’m not getting anywhere near that motherfucker if I can help it.”

_____

Rain Dinners is, in a word, extravagant.

I manage to squirrel my way inside with the sheer scarf from my hat over my (still quite busted up) face like a veil, and immediately beeline for a roulette table. I can't keep the grin off my face as I slide into a free seat beside a gentleman in a fine blue suit.

"What's the buy in?" I ask the dealer, who glances over my attire with clear disdain.

"Minimum bets of 10,000 berri at this table, ma'am," he says, not paying me much heed.

My grin widens. "Wonderful. 20,000 on red. And please, Detective if you must."

The dealer blinks, eyes shooting back up as I drop my chips in the pocket. The man beside me snorts under his breath.

As the dealer starts to spin, the man leans closer to me with a sly smile. "Detective, are you?" he murmurs in a smooth voice. I take a moment to look him over, my face hidden by hat and scarf.

He has wild blue (Is this normal for this world or do I have to be worried about main character energy here?) hair that curls up along his jaw and across part of his forehead, half of it tied up in a messy bun at the back. He has olive skin and a singular beauty mark under one of his pale eyes. There's an expensive watch on his wrist, and his ankles are crossed over a very recognizable pair of brown leather shoes.

I shoot him a matching smile from under my veil. "By trade, yes. But I can assure you, I'm not at this table for that sort of business." He chuckles under his breath as the ball comes to a stop in pocket 14. The dealer gives me a look as I'm passed more chips. "40,000 on red," I smirk.

"You do know the house always has the advantage, right?" he murmurs.

I smirk at the dealer as he spins the wheel. "The house will need more than an advantage to beat *me."*

Four rolls later, all betting my winnings on red, the dealer looks like he wants to jump me and the man I'm beside can't stop laughing.

"How do you do that?" he asks through snickers.

I grin at him, placing another bet on red. "Simple, the universe just adores me. And red is my Captain's favourite colour."

"A sailor then? Marine, or something less savoury?" he questions, leaning closer again.

I snort. "Wouldn't you like to know, Navy boy?" He blinks at me, surprised. "Let's shake things up. 640,000 berri on 32." The dealer sends me a both desperate and furious look.

My seat neighbour laughs softly again. "What gave it away?"

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. "Your posture, and those Marine issued shoes. Plus, blue just suits you too well."

The man's laugh is drowned out by the dealer choking and the other occupants of the table cheering. "And that's 22,400,000 berri to the Detective," he coughs out, pale and sweating.

I throw my head back and laugh.

"Well, well, well. I see you're having fun, Detective Domino," a familiar voice croons behind me.

I don't bother turning. I just stack up my chips and wave over a nearby floor staff. "Be a dear and get these cashed in for me, will you?" I murmur. He shoots a look at the woman behind me, gives me a slow nod and trots off. "Lovely day isn't it, Miss All-Sunday?" I croon back.

Robin hums, leaning forward into my periphery and shifting aside her curtain of dark hair to reveal a very fake looking smile. “That it is. Sir Crocodile has had a VIP room set up for you.”

I roll my shoulders, leaning back in the chair to get a better read on Robin as the man beside me shifts. “Hm. I hate to refuse, but I much prefer slumming it up on the commoner deck,” I say with a smirk.

The Marine tenses lightly as Robin snickers. “I’m afraid Sir Crocodile insists,” she says, fake smile still in place as she delicately traces the rim of her white cowboy hat.

I glance at her under my veil. “Pity then, that I’m not here on Crocodile’s dime.”

Her smile broadens. “He thought you might say something like that.”

Two men in suits step up at the sides of my chair. I sigh, tucking a hand under my scarf to rub at my eyes. “If we may wait for my money to arrive, I’d be ever so grateful.”

On that cue, the worker I had handed my chips runs up with a small briefcase that he passes me before running back off. “Alright,” I sigh, getting to my feet, “let’s get this over with.” I send my Marine pal a two fingered salute as I turn.

I catch a glimpse of Robin’s face as I go, and am momentarily thrown by what I see. She’s glancing at the man I was sat beside looking startled, like she had failed to notice him until I bid him goodbye. The split second read I get in her says she’s quite uncomfortable with him, and I just don’t know why.

I don’t get to read into it more before I’m escorted away.

I’m led through the casino, Robin splitting off at some point, and into a white hallway. Ten paces into the hall I take action. I stomp my heel into the man on my left’s foot, as he bends over I throw all of my body weight into the one on my right, simultaneously swinging my case up into the face of the first guy.

As they both groan, I slip my pistol out of my belt and shoot. I fire a shot into the guy against the wall's foot, then fire a second shot into the first guy's shoulder.

Five bullets left.

My hands are abruptly seized. A second pair of hands grabs onto my shoulders, then a third wraps around my ribs and I’m yanked backwards, forcing my back into an arch. I grunt as my spine protests.

“Dear me, Detective Domino. I leave for a few seconds and you do this?” Robin's voice reprimands as my head is forced back to look at her.

“Sorry. I just had to take the opportunity!” I groan as I’m bent further.

She tuts, rounding in front of me with her arms crossed in an x over her chest. “It seems we’ll have to do this the hard way.” She lowers her arms to pluck my pistol from my hand and tuck it back into its holster. My stomach flips as I’m hoisted in the air by yet another pair of arms, and rolled down the hall to where Robin has stopped. “Apologies, Detective. This may be a bit of a rough ride, but I’ll try to be gentle.”

And the floor falls away. I drop twenty, maybe thirty feet and smack my knees into hard concrete. “OW! Gee, thanks for being gentle, Miss All-Sunday!” I holler up, getting to my feet to shake my fist at the distant opening. My money case falls down and bonks me on the head.

There’s a low chuckle from outside the cage I’m in. I heave a sigh, dust off my knees, and turn to greet him.

Crocodile sits on his chair like a throne, a cigar slipped lazily between smirking lips. He is gently running a cloth over his large golden hook hand, and staring into the cage with clear amusement. There's a spread of food and wine in front of him, and a second place setting across the table.

I raise a single hand. "Yo."

"I hear you're made quite a nuisance of yourself up in my casino, E. D. Domino," he says, rubbing what may or may not be blood from the metal appendage.

"I make a nuisance of myself everywhere, don't take it personally," I reply, scooting toward the bars and examining the connections. Why is the lattice work on this thing held together by *pins?* "Besides, I was just playing the game as intended, sorry I'm one of god's favourites."

He raises an eyebrow, running the curve of his hook across the horizontal scar that spans the entirety of his face. "Let's get right to business. You seem like a smart woman, Detective Domino."

I raise my eyebrow back "Do I? Dude, I'm not even a woman, how'd I manage that?"

Crocodile's response is cut off by the sound of the hatch above me opening again, followed quickly by a cacophony of screaming and yelling.

I smoosh myself back into the bars as my crew, plus Smoker, tumble down into the cage in a heap on the floor. Luffy stumbles to his feet and takes in the cage, and me standing there blinking at them like a deer in headlights. "Oh hey Ed!"

I sigh. "…Hey guys."

Nami picks herself up using Zoro as leverage. "What the hell are you doing in here? I thought you were just here to scout!" she exclaims, eyes immediately drawn to my case.

I laugh a little nervously. “Yeah… About that. By ‘scouting’ I meant ‘let me go gamble while you bozos inevitably got chased around the entire city.’ But! I turned over 22 million berries in profit during the twenty minutes I was up there, so I think it’s fine, right?”

Everyone’s jaws drop. Nami reaches for my case with trembling and reverent hands. “T — twenty two *million?!* Just from twenty minutes of gambling?! What kind of crazy luck do you have?! ”

I scoot my case away from her grabby hands. “Eh. I’ve always been great at roulette. You should see me play Speed, I’m fucking terrifying,” I boast, hand on my hip and a cocky smile on my lips. There’s a reason no one wants to play card games with me. I get *violently* competitive.

“So while we were running for our lives from this psychopath, you were playing *casino games?!”* Zoro shouts, jerking his thumb at Smoker, who has gotten to his feet and is reaching for his jutte.

He swings at Luffy with it, so I tug him down and under the blow by the shoulders. “Dude, don't even bother,” I groan, sliding in between him and my Captain and shoving the end of the weapon away from us. “Luffy, don’t touch the bars. Cancerman, you seem smart enough I don’t have to tell you the same.”

Usopp scoots behind me like a shield, which is objectively stupid because despite the spite filled workouts I am still quite frail, and pokes one of the bars. “Why not?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “It’s seastone. Why don’t you know about seastone? Of course you don’t know about seastone. It sucks the life outta Devil Fruit users, smoke machine’s jutte is tipped in the shit.”

Smoker growls under his breath. “You know too much.”

I fold my arms and side eye him. “It’s part of the job, Godfather.” His eye twitches and there’s a deep chuckle from Crocodile outside the cage. I sigh. “Oh yeah, he’s here by the way.”

Usopp shrieks and jumps to my other side, now shielding himself from Crocodile and inadvertently putting himself closer to Smoker. “Who the hell is that?” Luffy shouts, grabbing onto the bars and immediately deflating.

“Amusing. Though I do tire of your circus act,” he rumbles, taking his cigar out of his mouth to flick some ash off the end then putting it right back. “I see Smoker has ended up here as well. Of your own accord, I’m sure. The Marines do trust me quite a bit.” Smoker growls under his breath. Crocodile just laughs again. “No matter, it works out all the same. Maybe this is preferable to the staged accident I had planned for you.”

Smoker glowers at him, taking a seat on the bench thing in the cage. “Crocodile. You’re every bit the snake I thought you were,” he snarls.

Luffy, back up from the momentary seastone drain, launches himself right back at the bars. “So you’re Crocodile?! I’m gonna kick your ass!” he hollers, then once again deflates because of the seastone. Dumbass.

Crocodile flashes a wry grin. “Heh. You must be Strawhat Luffy. I would congratulate you and your fellows on how far you’ve come, but we all know I’d be lying. Why don’t you just sit tight while we wait for our guest of honour? My partner should be on her way with her momentarily.”

“Guest of honour?” Nami mutters. I sigh and rub a finger down the knot of my brow.

Time to do what I do best.

Push the envelope.

I stick my head through one of the gaps in the bars, threading my arms though others to lean out and give Crocodile a catty grin. “Hey dude, weird ask but are you trans? Your vibe says trans.”

He chokes on his cigar. Everyone in the cage chokes on their spit.

“Excuse me?!” he coughs, taking a few menacing steps toward the cage.

“Sorry, that was kinda rude to ask,” I laugh, waving an apologetic hand. “You never know with gaydar, sometimes I’m waaaaay off. Real talk though, you wanna join my pirate GSA?”

Nami hisses behind me, grabbing my shirt and shaking. “Ed you goddamn idiot, why are you *antagonizing him?!”*

I shrug her off with another laugh. “When you get a vibe, you get a vibe. Am I right?” I toss a smirk over my shoulder at my group. Usopp looks positively terrified, Smoker looks like he’d give anything to get away from us, Luffy looks confused but is nodding like he agrees anyways, and Zoro is actually shrugging like he can’t argue with me.

I turn back to Crocodile. His entire face is twitching in time with his hook and I’d be a little more concerned about him gutting me if his face wasn’t bright pink. “Hold your fucking tongue, Detective Domino,” he growls.

I put my hands up. “Man, I’m just saying — gay pirates. There’s a lot of gay pirates, and we should all stick together. Even if some of us are assholes! Don’t go against the grain, dude,” I say with an easy grin.

God bless the 4kids dub.

Nami shoves her face into my shoulder with a whimper while Luffy bursts out laughing behind me. Crocodile gives me a long suffering look, then sits back down in his chair and spins it around.

There’s silence from everyone but Luffy for a second. “...Are you just gonna pretend not to hear me now?” I call over, eyebrow raised. There’s, predictably, no response. “Yeesh, pressed the wrong buttons, got it,” I mutter, turning back to the group.

Zoro has slumped down on the ground and looks fit to take a nap, Luffy is just kinda… rolling on the floor, and Usopp is getting closer to tears every second he has to stay in here with Smoker.

Nami makes another sound into my shoulder and I pat her on the head. “Let’s be honest guys, this could be worse!” I say optimistically. Nami gives me a doubtful look. “You could be in here without me or my obscene amount of money!”

Nami starts crying.

Chapter End Notes

E. D. “I’m a clumsy idiot but I’m also one of the most lucky mfs you’ll ever meet” Domino walking into a real casino for the first time: Wow this is nothing like online rollers. I'm going to win gambling.

Don't gamble unless you're of age kids. Be smart with your money.

I love shoving OC's in here just because you'll never know if they're actually important or not until it's too late. Mwahahahhaha.

Chapter 37: Chapter Thirty Seven: Coming Out Of My Cage

Chapter Summary

Mr. Brightside - The Killers

I pause in my filing. "...I know I've got a fair bit of trust issues that are very poorly addressed, but goddamn dude. The trans allegations are *real* and *unbeatable."*

Chapter Notes

Ed does not actual come out of the cage in this chapter. But I though it was really funny to name it this anyways.

Let's talk about OPLA??? IT WAS SO GOOD???? EVEN MY MOTHER LIKED IT??????? EVERYONE WAS SO UNBELIEVABLY HOT??????????? Literally my only complaint is about Garp's characterization??? And even that is pretty good in the context of the show?????

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Look, I'm Sanji. 'Who ate the meat?'" Luffy says with a godawful new yorker accent, pretending to smoke and making an incredibly dumb face. Usopp bursts out laughing and I crack a smile where I'm fiddling with the hinges of the door.

Nami screams into the case I let her hold (she demanded half of my winnings to hold it for me, and I politely told her to go fuck herself and simply enjoy the temporary comfort item) and shoots me a desperate look.

"I dunno man, he's getting pretty good at those. Don't understand where he got the accent though," I mumble, trying to jiggle the hinge pin out of the knuckles. I'm not having a whole lot of luck. "His impression of me was great."

Luffy hoots and ruffles his hair over his face, raising an eyebrow. "'Ed detective. I am very smart. Smart people things.' How was that?"

I frown. “I liked the first one better. The screaming in terror was really spot on.” And it made Usopp fall over in shock, so that was an added bonus.

“It seems others prize your intelligence quite highly,” Crocodile’s voice rumbles from behind his still turned chair.

“Oh, so *now* you’re talking to me?” I grumble, stabbing at the hinge with my pen knife. It is still not working.

“Do you think I could pull off a Vivi impression?” Luffy wonders aloud.

Nami takes this as her que to punch him upside the head. “Stop screwing around! We are in *trouble* in case you forgot!” she screams, flailing her arms around and barely missing Usopp with my case as he hits the deck.

“You sure are a high spirited young lady,” Crocodile muses, still not turning his chair.

Nami sniffs. “What of it?”

I snort, switching to my knife's tiny file to saw at the hinge futilely. “Maybe he’s hitting on you,” I snark, thinking back to Ace and snickering.

Nami makes a disgusted sound. “EW! Before you get any ideas mister, you oughta know I’m a raging lesbian! And I don’t go for tyrannical egomaniacs either!”

“Period queen, you tell ‘em!” I cheer, switching tactics to trying to pick the lock. That also goes quite poorly.

“I’m not—! UGH shut up!” Crocodile snaps, twisting in his chair to shoot us a dirty look.

“Yeesh, so touchy,” Nami huffs. “Can’t even enjoy your high horse while you’re still up there, huh? Either way, when we get out of here these guys are gonna kick your ass. Ed probably already has your whole plan figured out!” she says haughtily.

Crocodile throws us what I can only call a pitying side eye. “You hold a great deal of trust in these people, don’t you? That’s… haha,” he shakes his head and narrows his eyes, “trust is the most useless thing in the world.”

I pause in my filing. “...I know I’ve got a fair bit of trust issues that are very poorly addressed, but goddamn dude. The trans allegations are *real* and *unbeatable.”*

Crocodile’s enraged squawking does nothing to drown out the doors being thrown open. “CROCODILE!” Vivi yells, taking quick purposeful strides down the stairs, Robin poised stoic in the doorway.

My friends make shouts of shock beside me.

Crocodile rapidly composes himself. “Ah, Princess Vivi of Alabasta! Or should I say Miss Wednesday? You’ve done quite well to make it this far,” he says, spreading his arms.

Vivi juts out her chin and glowers. “And I’d go further to see you dead, Mr. 0!”

I stick my arm out of the cage to wave. “Hi Vives! Remember that one thing I said that one time about that one thing?”

Everyone pauses. “...What thing?” Vivi asks slowly.

“The spit thing!” I yell, shaking the bars. Vivi blinks. Crocodile blinks. Luffy starts laughing again.

“Not a single thing has come out of your mouth since we met that I haven’t hated with the utmost sincerity,” Crocodile says genuinely.

I blow a raspberry at him. “Vives, keep a level head please?” I call up at her. She gives me a solemn nod, then brandishes her peacock slashers and leaps down the stairs with a yell. “Or just fight him I guess,” I mumble, smacking my hand into my forehead.

“Wait, open the cage first!” Luffy hollers, tugging his hat further on his head while everyone else starts screaming.

Vivi does not do that. She races down the stairs, plants a foot and launches herself onto the table, one slasher flying right at Crocodile’s head. He looks completely unbothered by this right up until it’s inches from his face. I can see his eyes widen before he’s leaning his head to the side.

Vivi’s slasher leaves a mark on his face before embedding itself in the chair.

There’s a moment of silence before everyone dissolves into screaming again. My jaw is on the fucking floor. Water drips down her slasher and darkens the upholstery of the chair where it’s lodged.

Crocodile stares at Vivi, crouched on the table arm outstretched and a fierce glare levelled at him. “That… simply won’t do,” he says slowly. Then he’s dissolving into a cloud of sand. Vivi’s face goes pale as she quickly pulls her slasher back and tries to swing it into the sand, to no avail.

I slap my hands on the bars of the cage. “Behind you!” I yell frantically. Vivi swings her head around, but not fast enough. Crocodile has already reformed and has his hook twisted around her wrists before she can make a move.

He jerks his head up at Robin before returning back to Vivi. “I sure hope that felt good, it won’t be happening again,” he growls, shoving her into the other chair. Robin wastes no time in making her way down the stairs and tying Vivi hands behind her, a keen eye on my pinched expression as she does.

“Still, your timing couldn’t be better. It should just about be time for the party. Right, Miss All-Sunday?” Crocodile says, using a handkerchief to dab the blood away from his face.

Robin pulls a pocket watch from her long white coat, a mild smile fixed on her face. “Yes. It’s seven o’clock. Operation Utopia is underway.”

“Operation Utopia?” Nami mutters, fists clenched on the bars.

“Wassat?” Luffy asks, frown stretching his mouth.

Crocodile just starts laughing. I grumble under my breath. “Let me guess, your big plan to destroy Alabasta and get what you want? Are you gonna explain the whole thing to us in a monologue now?” I ask rhetorically. “‘Behold how I will steal the great deathray that lives in this kingdom and take over the world!’ Something like that?”

Smoker shoots me a weird look from the corner. Robin’s eyes dart to me as Crocodile stops laughing. “What exactly is it you know, Detective Domino?” he asks lowly.

I shrug. “Probably all of it.”

He slams his hook into the table, starling Vivi further into her seat. “This isn't a game! What do you know of my plans?” he growls.

Alright, how much of this shit do I actually remember…

I huff a breath, leaning on the bars and glaring at him. “You want the kingdom to collapse in on itself, without having to do any of the actual fighting, right? You’ve been destabilizing the King's reputation relentlessly for the past three years, so you’ve probably kidnapped him by now.” Vivi gasps harshly as her eyes widen. “You’ve most likely got Bon Clay dressed up as him to cause a scene in… Nanohana? Some ‘no one can find out I boogie woggied!’ BS

before you have some of your agents disguised as royal soldiers wreak havoc. I'd count on Mr. 1 and Miss Doublefinger being there too."

Did I just drop another 4kids line? Yes I did. Wait, is that where Luffy got the shitty Sanji accent?

Crocodile's jaw flexes as I continue, and Robin's eyes keep darting back and forth between us like she's been locked in a room with a live bomb. "You've most likely hand delivered them weapons to entice them into attacking the capital." I tilt my head down and look at him through my lashes under the brim of my hat. "The ideal nation. On the surface that's certainly what the goal of your little operation looks like. But is that really the case..? 'A pirate trying to steal a kingdom is a bad joke,'" I quote, "so you're after something. Something only Alabasta has to offer." Robin's expression tightens and Crocodile looks all the more closer to snapping my neck. "What could that be, I wonder..? Some kind of weapon, perchance even something ancient—"

My tirade is cut off by Crocodile suddenly appearing before me, sticking his hook swiftly but precisely through the bars without touching them, hooking it into my clothes, and slamming me into the bars to be face to face with him.

"I don't know how you found *any* of that out, or what you know of the weapon, but it remains you are much too dangerous to let live," he breathes into my face. I'm suddenly confronted by the very real idea that this man could, and wants to, kill me.

This isn't a game.

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF ED!" Luffy screams, trying to punch through the bars at Crocodile. He slides back to avoid it, dropping me in the process. Luffy deflates as he comes in contact with the seastone.

I scramble back from the bars, hand over my rapidly paced heart. Jesus *fuck* I changed my mind about antagonizing this fucker! Nami comes up behind me and helps me to my feet. "People here really don't like hearing the truth, huh?" I say raggedly.

“That’s it. We’re headed out to Alubarna now. I have a question for the King,” Crocodile snaps, turning to the shell-shocked Robin and furious Vivi while he strides purposefully to the second large door in the room.

Vivi throws herself out of her chair as he moves. “Stop! Haven't you done enough?! Leave my father out of this!” she shrieks, wiggling across the floor.

Crocodile stares down at her in disdain. “What do you care for more, I wonder?” he pulls a key from his pocket and tosses it carelessly behind him. It lands on the floor with a clink before it opens up like a trap door and falls below the floor.

Vivi makes a squeaky sound, struggling on the ground and trying to get closer to the hole, before her ropes are snapping and she scrambles right up to the edge to peer down.

“You’re free to come with us, Princess. Or you could save these people,” Crocodile intones, a smirk creeping up his face. “You have about eight hours before the bloodshed begins. It will take longer than that for you to get to Alubarna, so I’d suggest leaving now.”

I am suddenly feeling like I could have handled this much better.

“Was that the key to the cell?” Luffy yells, trying to crane his neck to see.

“Yes. And now it’s down in the bananagator pen. All you have to do is open the cage for them,” Crocodile sneers, marching closer as the door swings open with his coat swishing behind him. The tunnel, clear and made of glass, stretches out before him.

A dark shape passes one of the windows. Through them we can see one of the mentioned bananagators. “Woah! Look, there’s gators growing out of those bananas! Weird bananas!” Luffy exclaims.

Usopp scoffs. “It’s clearly bananas growing out of gators. Weird gators.”

“It could be both, you never know. Chicken or the egg,” I mumble.

Vivi makes another sound of shock. “What happened, Vivi?” Nami calls over, her face twisted in worry.

“A bananagator ate the key!” she cries.

All my companions make groans and screams. “Go down and make it spit it out!” Luffy demands.

“Are you crazy?! Those things would kill me! They eat *Sea Kings!”* Vivi shrieks.

Crocodile laughs, pausing in his path to taunt us. “Oh, that’s too bad. By the way, in an hour this room will be one big fish tank. So take your pick, as many citizens as you can, or five futureless pirates. Make your bet Miss Wednesday, and hope your friend's luck will rub off on you!” He gives us an oily grin. “I really must thank your country for being populated by idiots like those rebels and the digging old man in Yuba.”

“Hah? The dried up old guy?” Luffy questions, face twisted in a frown.

Crocodile tilts his head. “Oh, you know him? Though the oasis died, he still keeps doggedly digging it up. It really is too funny.”

Zoro groans. “So Ed was right about that too, then? That you were the one causing the sandstorms?”

Luffy whips his head to Zoro, then me, then turns a furious glare on Crocodile. “That was you?! I’ll kill you!”

Crocodile barely acknowledges him. He just walks right through the door, still laughing. Robin throws me another indecipherable look before she's following him out.

More trap doors flip open throughout the chamber, and water starts gushing up through them. "AAAH! The water's coming in! We're gonna drown!" Usopp shrieks, hands grabbing at his hair. "Vivi you gotta get us out of here!"

"Quit freaking out," Zoro commands.

"Are you kidding?! How can I not freak out at a time like this?! We're gonna drown like *RATS!"* Usopp retorts, voice climbing higher.

Vivi's slasher makes a scraping sound as it's dragged across the floor, Vivi rearing her hand up before it falls limp.

"VIVI!" Luffy screams. "GET US OUT OF HERE!"

The Strawhats fall silent around me.

"Ha! Finally begging for your life, eh Strawhat? It's only natural for everyone to be afraid of death," Crocodile laughs, pausing in his advance.

"If you don't get us out of here, who's gonna kick his ass?!" Luffy hollers.

Crocodile's eyes dart back to him in the cage. "Don't be so full of yourself, fishbait," he spits out.

"Yeah? Big words from a minnow, Luffy grits back. I couldn't stop my snort if I wanted to. From the corridor Crocodile and Robin are standing in is the sounds of a hatch opening, before a giant bananagator is lumbering into the room with us. "Vivi! You can beat it!" Luffy yells.

“Just punch it in the face! You’re good at that!” I add.

Fuck, I gotta find a way out of this cage *now.* I try shaking the bars, minimal give. I try pushing on the pins holding it together. They don’t move much under the pressure of my thumbs, but they do budge. An idea lights up in my brain.

There’s a loud crunch and when I look up an entire chunk of the staircase is missing. There’s quite a bit of screaming going on around me, and I’m frantically looking around for something I can use.

Then there’s the sound of a Transponder ringing from the hall Crocodile is down. I pause. It’s answered with a click. “Yes?” Robin asks.

“Hello?” Sanji’s voice filters through. “Hellooo? Can you hear me?” I slap my hand over my mouth to stop myself from laughing.

“Yes, I can hear you. Is this a Millions?” Robin answers.

“Hey pal, is this thing working? I’ve never used a baby Transponder before,” Sanji continues.

“Yeah, it’s connected. You can speak,” another voice says.

“Hurry up and state your business! What’s going on?!” Crocodile snaps.

“Oh, I’ve definitely heard that voice before,” Sanji says. “Hello, you’ve reached the crap cafe.” I can’t help but let a snicker out.

“...Crap cafe?” Crocodile grits out.

“Ah, so it seems you remember me. I’m glad to hear it,” Sanji says, amusement in his voice.

I slap my hand over Luffy’s mouth before he can say anything stupid. “Who are you?!” Crocodile demands.

Sanji hums. “Me? I’m… Mr. Prince.” I burst into full on laughter. “Is that Ed I hear?” he asks playfully.

“Mr. Prince! We’re stuck in a cage with fucking gators shaped like bananas!” I wheeze out, smacking my hands into the bars. “Under the casino!”

“Shut up!” Crocodile snaps.

“Also this dude has been so goddamn mean to me!” I add, sticking my tongue out at Crocodile.

“Can’t have that!” Sanji laughs. “How about I just—” The rest of Sanji’s sentence is cut off by a loud gunshot and a sound of pain.

“Take that you son of a bitch! What should I do with him sir?” the second voice asks as my friends freak out around me.

I smack Usopp on the shoulder. “Don’t you recognize bad acting when you hear it?” I hiss quietly to him.

He blinks as understanding dawns on his face. “No! Mr. Prince! Our last hope, dashed just like that! Curse you, dastardly villains!” Usopp wails, clutching at his chest.

I smack him again. “Tone it down, Shakespeare!”

Crocodile throws us a nasty look before turning back to the snail. “Where are you right now?!” he demands harshly.

“At the front of Rain Dinners, sir,” the second voice, which is starting to sound more and more like he’s holding back tears, replies.

I catch Vivi’s eye outside of the cage as she starts inching back. ‘Don’t move,’ I mouth to her. She furrows her eyebrow but nods faintly.

“Let’s go up to the gate then,” Crocodile announces, starting back down the tunnel as the call ends with a click.

“Are you sure, sir? The Billions still don’t know you’re their boss,” Robin asks.

“Doesn’t matter. There’s nothing suspicious about me going up there as Crocodile, especially since it’s a commotion at the front of my own casino,” he replies, striding down the hall away from us. The click of their footsteps grows fainter until the rush of water and the low growl of the bananagator are the only sounds aside from us.

I stare down the tunnel for a second longer, then turn back to Vivi. I flash her a thumbs up. “Go time! HEY BANANAGATOR! COME AT ME BRO!” I holler, smacking my hands on to the cage and generally creating as much noise as I can.

My companions all shriek around me, Usopp loudest of all. “WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!” he screams, scuttling to the middle of the cage as the bananagator rears its head back at us.

“Causing a distraction, duh!” I reply, scooting back as the gator makes a big chomp on the cage. The structure rattles ominously around us as everyone starts screaming lounder.

“Damnit Domino, are you mad?!” Smoker yells, getting to his feet as the walls shake.

“Mad genius! GO VIVES GO!” I scream, watching Vivi give me a thumbs up and wide smile as she makes it up the stairs unimpeded.

“Thank you Ed! I’ll go get help and be right back, I’m not going to abandon you guys! I’m sure Sanji is ok out there!” she calls, taking off running through the door.

I clap my hands as the gator tries another chomp and my friends all scream again. “Alright! Luffy and Usopp, in that corner and making as much noise as you can! Nami, try to pick that lock! Zoro, try to learn to cut metal before I crack this bitch or you owe me 7,000 berri! Fumigator, let me borrow your jutte!” I command.

“Why the hell should I do that?!” Smoker rasps, eyebrow twitching. “Do you have any idea the situation we’re in? That woman with Crocodile has had an over 70 million berri bounty on her head for over twenty years! This goes far beyond Alabasta, this could put the whole damn world in danger!”

The water level is rising way too fucking fast, and every step we take is splashing water across the bottoms of my pants.

I grind my teeth together. “Do you know anything about her besides her bounty? Or are you just regurgitating the bullshit the government feeds you? Get your *head* out of your *ass* or we’re going to *die!”*

“Give me one good reason I should give you it,” he demands, a tick in his jaw that betrays how much those words bothered him. I’m actually amazed he hasn't bitten his cigars clean in half.

I glare at him and stick my chin out. “Seatone on seastone, you fucking idiot! Do you want to slowly drown like cats in a bag down here, or do you wanna live to see another pirate hunting day? Gimme the damn jutte!” I yell.

He stares me down for a long second. “Fine,” he grits, tossing me the large weapon.

I nod my head in thanks and turn to the rest of my shell shocked companions. “Well?!” I snap.

They all scramble to their appointed positions at once. Zoro shoots me a smirk. “And you thought you’d be a bad First Mate.”

I feel my face get red. “Shut up and get to work, ingrate!”

Usopp and Luffy are yelling very unflattering things about the gators mother while Zoro stares at the bars with his sword drawn intently. Nami has my case pinched between her knees and has very hesitantly stuck her hands out the cage and is sticking lockpicks in the keyhole.

I try lining up the tip of the jutte with one of the pins, but the jutte is just a tad too big. I grumble in frustration but move on to lining it up with a bar between two pins instead.

“What the hell are you doing?” Smoker asks behind me.

“Shut up. I’m concentrating,” I grunt, trying to channel whatever strength my stupid arms have. “C’mon baby, work with me,” I mumble. I take a deep breath, raise the jutte, and crack it down with as much force as I can, a yell sounding out of my throat.

The force of the hit vibrates up through my arms, and there's a weird shriek from the bar as it bends slightly downwards. The two pins on either side of where I hit slightly bulge out of their sockets. I smile.

“Here we go again!” I laugh, taking another swing. The bar dents downward, dislodging from the lattice while the two pins splash into the water and the next two pop out. I blink. “Oh my god, that worked!” I holler.

“That worked?” Smoker rumbles incredulously behind me. “How much upper body strength do you have? You look so… scrawny.”

I scoff, aiming at the bar below the one I've been hitting. “Scrawny? Nah. I’m *lean.”* I crack the jutte down again. The bar bends down with a satisfying creak and groan, a new series of five or so pins popping out of this one.

Almost there.

“This shit is supposed to be harder than diamond, so I need everyone to acknowledge how fucking crazy this is right now,” I cackle. With more room under my original bar, I smack down again, a grunt slipping out between my teeth. There’s more splashes from pins dropping as a maybe three foot tall hole opens up. That only leaves the problem of the vertical bars.

I hoop and holler, jumping in the air and accidentally kicking water everywhere. “Let’s go! We win these!” I yell, gearing up the jutte like a baseball bat.

“What are you—” I cut Smoker off by swinging the jutte one last time with a yell right from the pit of my stomach. It crashes into a vertical bar in the middle of the hole, and the bar creaks sideways. The heads of no less than twelve pins splash to the ground as the bar pushes the two next to it out of place, crushing them together with a shriek.

I heave in a breath and take a pause. I stare at the hole big enough for a person to try squeezing through I made with my own strength. I run my eyes up my arms like I’ll see some kinda mystical golden light pouring out of my veins. I don’t.

“...I’m upgrading your workout routine. You’re doing way more than pushups now,” Zoro says, begrudgingly impressed while sheathing his sword in thinly veiled disappointment.

“Good god Ed, where the hell have you been hiding *that?!”* Nami yells, arms withdrawn back into the cage.

“No goddamn clue,” I answer breathlessly, holding the jutte out behind me without looking so I can bend down and scoop up a handful of the pins from the water and shove them in my pocket.

The jutte is taken from my hands. “I’ll admit that was… somewhat impressive,” Smoker says slowly.

“Somewhat? That was a beautiful display!” a voice calls from on high. We all dart our eyes up to see Sanji, wearing glasses and back in his signature suit, and Vivi poised at the top of the stairs staring down at us in the cage.

“My only complaint is that you’re depriving me of the chance to rescue you myself,” Sanji says with a smirk.

Chapter End Notes

College starts up this week! while you probably won’t see a significant effect on this fic for about a month or two because of my pre-written material, after that point we may be slowing down to once a week updates or less. Who knows, maybe my work load will end up being very manageable and nothing will change. Either way, I’ll keep y’all updated and you can rest assured college classes won’t be the thing that kills this fic.

Chapter 38: Chapter Thirty Eight: I Am Not A Fool Entire, No, I Know What Is Coming

Chapter Summary

Bitter Water - The Oh Hellos

There's a moment of silence.

"That was hot," I blurt.

Chapter Notes

Dude the first day of collage kicked my ASS. Why is this so HARD?!

I literally have four hours between two two hour classes today where I just have to sit and do fuck all because the commute between my house and the school is barely worth it. I mean I'm probably gonna write but dude... writing fanfiction in public is a line I don't know if I can cross...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm forced to postpone any kind of victory celebration as I jump back away from the snapping jaws of the bananagator.

"You can still save our lives, Prince Charming!" I holler, nearly splashing ass backwards into the thigh high water as it slows my legs.

Luffy clumsily bumps into my side as he slowly slumps inward. I loop one of his arms over my neck, and try to channel whatever the fuck I just did to hook my own arms under his legs and hoist him out of the water.

There's a series of splashing sounds before Sanji appears in front of the cage and kicks the bananagator so hard it goes flying with a loud crunching sound. He takes a slow hit of his

cigarette then holds it out towards us. “Sorry to keep you all waiting,” he says with a smirk.

There’s a moment of silence.

“That was hot,” I blurt.

His cool facade crumples like paper. He starts wiggling around and squealing like a schoolgirl while I twist to the side and stick my torso out through the gap I made with Luffy still in my arms still inside the cage.

Then I spot the approaching hoard of banangators waiting for us. I pause. “On second thought, can I wait in here?”

Zoro tries to push me aside so he can squeeze through. “Now you’re being modest? Fucking move then, I’ll kick their asses!”

The keyword is tries. He actually only succeeds in sticking his arm and sword though before getting the two of us jammed into the tight space, effectively getting us stuck.

“ZORO YOU IMPATIENT BASTARD!” I yell, trying to hit him without dropping Luffy or bisecting myself with one of the bars. My shoulder squeezes painfully against his armpit and I can see him swinging his sword blindly outside the cage.

“Good job Vivi!” Luffy hollers, cringing away from the bars and but still sticking a thumbs up for her. Vivi slouches over the broken stairs with a huge relieved smile.

“I’ll teach these bananas some table manners,” Sanji says, raising his leg straight up over his head in a move that would make most dancers seethe with jealousy.

“The third one has the key,” Smoker pipes up. When I crane my neck, I see he’s jumped up on the bench and is watching us with a weird mix of disdain and morbid curiosity.

Zoro starts wiggling again and I try to kick him. Luffy is getting impatient in my arms, but can't really go anywhere. "Zoro, you're gonna cut my head off, stop! Fucken kill 'em Sanji! I want a new pair of boots!" I call, trying to move my arms in any way that doesn't pinch shit it shouldn't pinch.

Sanji strides forward through the water like it isn't even there. "Then allow me."

And I thought watching him beat the shit out of the first one was hot. Lemme just say — nothing is more attractive than a man kicking a big scary lizard that wants to kill you so hard it pukes up a ball of wax. *Nothing.*

The ball rolls through the water for a second before there's a cracking sound. The distinctive hair of Mr. 3 pops out of the open shell, thin and dry arms over his head and shaking violently. "I'M ALIVE!" he yells.

We all stare at him as he rehydrates himself in the rushing water. He turns around to us and freezes.

3 blinks and looks down at the key stuck to the ball of wax, the cage and the water, us, and Sanji. He arches an eyebrow as a smirk slides onto his face. "Ah, I see what's happening here," he chuckles, then spins and whips the key across the room towards the bananagators.

"HAHA! You want the key? Go get it!" he yells, smug faced and pointing at us in mockery.

"Kill this fucker! Skin the bad tactician!" I howl, smashing my shoulder harder into Zoro while he yelps and tries to withdraw his arm, except he fucking can't because of how tightly he wedged us. "I don't care that the key was fake! Kill him!"

3 blinks as he seems to recognize me now. "YOU!" he yelps, turning his accusing finger on me. I snap my teeth at him.

“Fake?! Whatever, wait! Don’t kill him, make him make another key!” Usopp yells from the other side of Zoro, coming up to help dislodge us.

Sanji stalks forward, cracking his neck while 3 shrinks back with a nervous laugh.

Usopp manages to get me and Zoro unstuck by the time 3 is unlocking the door to the cage, blood all over his face. I very pointedly exit by squeezing through the hole I made with Luffy still tucked in my arms, glaring at Zoro the entire time.

Luffy pats my arms and hops down into the water, slowly trudging away while Usopp comes up to poke at the bars I bent. “I’m starting to think you’re not even human,” he says matter-of-factly.

I scoff. “Yeah, alright.” Then I give him a smile. “Very smart solution in there, Usopp,” I praise.

His face goes lightly pink and he scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah yeah, thanks.”

“And Sanji! You were fucking awesome!” I cheer, hooking my arm around his neck and shaking him. “Like a super spy or some shit! You’re a slightly less weird Austin Powers!”

Both of the boys scrunch their faces. “Who?” they say in unison.

I stop. I sigh. “Yeesh, that's sad.” It’s goddamn depressing no one's ever gonna get references like these again. *“Austin Powers.* International Man of Mystery. The Spy Who Shagged Me.”

Usopp raises an eyebrow. “What the hell is ‘shagged’?”

I smirk. *“Fucked.”*

The boys both scream. “A SPY FUCKED YOU?!” Usopp screeches, reeling away from me. Sanji clutches at my shirt in despair.

“No?! It’s the title of a movie!” I yell, smacking Usopp upside the head and hooking my spare arm over his neck as well.

“I don’t know anything about where you’re from except they make some fucked up shit,” Sanji says earnestly. I don’t have it in myself to disagree.

I squeeze both the boys and turn in the direction of the rest of the group. Vivi and Nami are reuniting beside us, and Zoro and Luffy are standing over the defeated pile of banangators that were blocking our path.

“That’s it?! I can take on hundreds of those weird bananas!” Luffy hollers, pumping his arms.

“And I had so much trouble with just one!” Vivi weeps, turning away and putting her face in her hands.

Usopp pats her on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, those two are monsters. Their crazy abnormal strength is nothing to compare yourself to.”

“Yeah?! I’d be stronger if I wasn’t soaked in water!” Luffy yells, furiously wringing out his clothes to no avail.

There’s thick spiderweb cracks and creeping from the tunnel and Nami hesitantly takes a step back. “I think you guys may have overdid it…” she mumbles, the hand not clutching my case shooting out to grab Vivi’s robe.

There’s some incredibly ominous creaking sounds from the tunnel, and then the fucking windows are shattering. The walls implode, water rushing in as we all start screaming.

I drop my hold on the boys to dash forward and grab Luffy as the room basically dissolves into rubble. He turns and gives me this imploring look and I understand instantly what he wants. “I’ve got the Captain, Zoro you get the chimney!” I shout, locking my arms together across his chest.

“What?!” Zoro shouts back, nearly slipping on the influx of rushing water. “He’s the enemy, we should just leave him!”

“He’ll die, he’ll sink like a hammer!” Luffy yells, grabbing onto my arms as hard as he can. Zoro makes a face.

Then we’re underwater.

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I break the surface with a gasp, twisting my body to haul Luffy up over the ledge of the street we emerged near. I cough as a breath stutters in my chest, and flip Luffy over as he starts spewing water.

“Those swimming lessons I took as a kid are paying off in spades…” I mumble into the ground before lifting my head. “Everyone alive?” I call hoarsely.

There’s a few groans in response. “We’re good. Usopp got hit by a rock,” Nami mumbles into the stonework. “I really hope your case is waterproof.”

Zoro surfaces and tosses Smoker up onto the road with a grunt.

“Why the hell did you save him?” Sanji reprimands, pushing himself up to help the girls.

“Not like I wanted to! He was gonna die!” Zoro grits, getting to his feet and shaking off the water.

“We lost a lot of time. Vivi, can we still make it?” Sanji asks, wiping beads of water from his glasses.

“I don’t know,” she responds, wringing water out of her robe.

“Nami, you still have that perfume you got in Nanohana?” Sanji continues.

Nami pauses in tying up her hair. “Yeah? Why?”

“Put some on, if you don’t mind,” he asks. She shrugs and takes out the bottle, spritzing some on her collarbones. Sanji swoons. “Ah! It’s like falling in love and going to heaven!” he croons.

“Yeah, then stay there,” Zoro grumbles.

Suddenly Smoker, who had been catching his breath on the ground, lunges at Zoro with his jutte. Zoro draws his sword at lightspeed and blocks the blow with no wasted effort. “Roronoa! Why did you save me?” he demands.

Zoro pushes the tip of the jutte away from himself. “I was just following Captain’s orders. Blame those two idiots over there, I would have let you drown,” he grumbles, jerking a thumb over at Luffy and I.

Smoker looks between us for a second. “Then you wouldn't mind me carrying out my duty here and arresting you, would you?” he rasps.

Sanji groans. “This is what you get for saving a Marine.”

“Put your conscience over your damn duty for once,” I grumble, shrugging off my shirt to wring the water out better. “Have we even done anything illegal since we got here that isn't calling ourselves pirates?”

Smoker’s face flattens. “Yes, yes you have.”

I blink. “Oh. Oops, sorry.”

“Did you just apologize for breaking the law?” Nami asks, reluctantly handing me my case back. I shrug. Usopp and Luffy choose this moment to spring back up from the ground, still soggy and quite angry.

“Alright! Full speed to Alubarna!” Usopp hollers.

“Where’s that Crocodile, lemme at him!” Luffy growls. Then he turns around and notices Smoker and raises his fists. “Smokey! You want some of this?! Bring it on!”

Usopp shrieks. “It’s Smoker! Are you crazy Luffy?! Let’s just run!”

Smoker stares at the group of us for a long moment. “Just this once…” he mumbles, voice rough and low, “...I’ll let you get away.” We all blink at him. “But next time we meet, Strawhat, you’re dead.”

There’s a pause as we take that in. Then the thundering sounds of approaching Marines, accompanied by yelling, comes echoing around the corner. “There they are! The Strawhat Pirates!”

Zoro throws his head back and laughs. Everyone takes off immediately, all except Luffy.

I grab his hand. “C’mon, Captain. Let's get going,” I say with a smile, winking at Smoker just to make him scrunch his nose at me.

Luffy laughs as the Marines yelling ramps up. “Yaknow what? Ed was right! You are pretty cool, Smokey!”

I yank Luffy forward and away as Smoker, red faced, takes a swing at us both. “GET OUTTA HERE!” he yells as we take off running into the sunset.

The lot of us run wild through the streets of Rainbase, Marines nipping at our heels the whole way. “We’re not gonna *run* all the way to Alubarna, are we?!” Usopp gasps between frantic breaths.

“Where’s Eyelash when you need him?!” Nami groans.

“This place has horses, right? Let’s get horses!” Luffy yells, basically dragging me behind him after I had almost tripped and eaten shit.

“But the Marines are everywhere!” Vivi responds.

“No need! Look up ahead.” Sanji calls from the front of the pack.

“Hey! You guys!” Chopper voice calls from up ahead. We all turn our heads and collectively drop our jaws.

“IS THAT A GIANT FUCKING CRAB?!”

It is. It’s a giant fucking crab. And Chopper and Eyelash the fucking camel are sitting on top of the damn thing as it comes scuttling sideways in front of us so fast it leaves a cloud of dust in its wake.

Me and Luffy both start drooling. “Giant… crab…” I mumble, shaking hands reaching forward reverently.

“Looks tasty!” Luffy yells, clutching fingers into my shirt.

“Hop on!” Chopper calls from atop it.

“We can ride the giant crab?! Hell yes!” Luffy screams, shaking me back and forth.

“Why does he look so creepy though..?” Nami mutters, tugging her robe tighter around her body.

“He’s one of Eyelash's friends! This is his hometown, so he’s got lots of weird friends around,” Chopper explains.

“Amazing! Crab Movers are hard to find because they burrow in the sand!” Vivi awes.

“Beats running,” Zoro says with a shrug.

Climbing up the damn thing is a chore, let me tell you that. I think the crab gets fed up with my apparent inability to climb his carapace because he eventually just plucks me up with a claw and tosses me up. I land on top of Vivi with a yelp.

That ends up being a good thing, because we barely get ten seconds of moving before Crocodile’s golden hook materializes from the sand in front of us and lunges for her. I swing my case into it hard enough to redirect its course.

“It’s him!” Luffy yells from behind me. I shove Vivi back there and plant myself in front of her regardless of the fact that I’m not much of a shield.

Luffy brushes past me and everything goes slow motion. I'm caught by the image of him skewered through by the hook, left in the sand to die. Fear lances through my gut like a flash of lightning. I jolt out my hand to catch him.

My finger catch in his robe and make him pause. "Wait!" I say, pure fucking desperation coating my words like a lacquer.

Luffy turns his head toward me, eyes confused but expression determined. Whatever he reads in my expression makes his eyes widen. "I'm listening," he says gently.

"Don't—" I cut myself off, biting harshly into my lip. "Don't go," I beg, sounding painfully small.

Luffy untangles my fingers from his clothing and hooks our pinkies together. "I gotta," he says with a smile. I know my face crumples. "I'll be careful," he promises.

I barely nod, but it's enough for Luffy to continue rocketing at Crocodile's hook, and using that to hitch a ride across the widening gap between us and the city.

"TAKE CARE OF VIVI! MAKE SURE SHE GETS TO ALUBARNA!" Luffy hollers, upside down and spread like a starfish but with a wide grin regardless.

I feel Zoro's hand land heavy on my shoulder. "Trust our Captain," he murmurs.

I clench my fists. "YOU GOT IT!" I scream back, turning my back to him to face Chopper. "Keep going! Full speed to Alubarna!"

"G — gotcha!" Chopper yelps, urging the crab onward.

“Ed! You’re abandoning Luffy?!” Usopp screeches. Zoro’s hand tightens on my shoulder as they hunch upwards.

Vivi lurches back like she wants to jump after Luffy. Nami catches her. “He’ll be alright Vivi! It’s Crocodile you have to worry about! He’s fought some pretty tough guys, and he’s always the one still standing!” she states, smile determined despite the sweat rolling down her face.

“Listen, Vivi,” Zoro starts, moving past me, “Luffy is gonna keep Crocodile busy so we can get away. The second those rebels took off, this was a race against the clock. If they clash with the royal army, your country is finished! You’re the only hope of preventing that, so no matter what happens to the rest of us… You have to live!”

“This is something you started, Vivi,” Sanji says, back turned to her. “You left Alabasta to take on a shadowy group who’s nature you didn’t know. But…” he glances back at her, “you’re not fighting alone anymore.”

Vivi’s eyes widen. “D — don’t worry V — Vivi! I’ve g — got your back!” Usopp shrieks, sweat pouring off him in waves.

Vivi sits up. “LUFFY!” she screams. “I’LL BE WAITING FOR YOU IN ALUBARNA!”

“KAY!” Luffy’s voice screams back.

“He’ll always come back to us eventually,” I say, walking closer to Vivi and the middle of the crab. “He…” I pause, “he’ll defeat Crocodile no matter what. We just have to do what we can do ourselves.” I glance around at my crew. “Any objections?” There's a chorus of ascent. I nod. “Great.”

Vivi suddenly tenses up beside me. “What’s the matter?” Nami asks nervously.

“There’s a sandstorm headed for Rainbase! It’s him, I know it!” she grits out.

I take her hand. She looks at me. I smile, albeit tensely. “It’s gonna be just fine. We’re gonna get your ass to the capital and you’re gonna have your damn conversation with those fuckhead rebels. If I have to shoot myself in the foot to do it, so fucking be it.”

Vivi blinks harshly. “That seems a little far,” she mumbles.

I squeeze her hand. “Nah, Vives. I’d fucken raise this sandy rock to the heavens for you right now. And when you see Luffy in Alubarna it’s gonna be the most amazing feeling in the world. So you take a deep breath, have a piece of jerky, and focus on the rebellion.”

She scrunches her face for a second before letting it relax. “Yeah. Yeah, ok,” she sighs. She takes my offered jerky and tears a chunk out of it, grinding the dried meat between her molars.

I tune out as the boys start arguing. I do my best to keep my eyes on the horizon and ignore that pure unadulterated idiocy going on around me, but Zoro and Sanji make it pretty fucken hard.

“Me?! Scared?! No way, pretty brow boy!” Zoro screams.

“Eh?! Watch your mouth, mosshead!” Sanji grits back.

“YOU WANNA FIGHT—”

Thank the stars, Nami cuts them off with swift knocks to the skull. “Shut it you jackasses!”

…Not to stir the pot, but this arc has been pretty fucken gay. Fruity shit after fruity shit. Not that I have any room to talk, but…

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The trip is… well it's tense. And long. Despite the wack ass speed this thing goes at, it's still a crab running through the desert. At least it's well into the evening at this point and it isn't blisteringly hot.

Zoro is working out with a camel, Usopp is nonstop saying incorrect shit to Chopper, Sanji is chain smoking like a 60's housewife, Nami is reading the instructions for her Clima-Tact, Vivi is staring of into the distance, and I'm reloading my gun lamenting leaving my cannon on the ship. It would have been ass dragging it through the desert, but goddamnit. *Cannon.*

"So… This may be a bad time to mention it, but Crab Movers can't really cross water. So we don't exactly have a way forward after we hit the Sandora river," Vivi suddenly blurts. We all pause.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE CAN'T CROSS THE RIVER ON THE CRAB?!" Usopp shrieks, eyes basically popping out of his skull.

"That's not great, since it's right there," Sanji announces, pointing ahead of us. We all blanch.

"That thing is miles wide! We can't swim across that!" Usopp wails, clutching onto Vivi's robe like she can save him.

"Do something, Pincers!" Nami begs.

"I got it! Pincers likes dancer girls!" Chopper suddenly proclaims.

I slap a hand on Nami's shoulder as she starts taking off her robe with a sigh. "Hey, Pincers. Eyes up here!" I call. Pincers creepy eyes crane back to look at me. "You get us across that fucking river and I'll concider changing my mind about cooking you."

Pincers blinks at me. I crack my knuckles. His eyes go wide, and then we're picking up speed. The Sandora River approaches swiftly, and just before we hit the water I smack Nami on the shoulder again. "You can show him your tits if you want now."

She throws her head back and laughs. "Hey Pincers!" she croons. Pincers looks back again as Nami shrugs off her robe and strikes a pose. "Feast your eyes!"

There's a loud thud behind us as both Sanji and Eyelash collapse to the ground. Steam explodes from the front of Pincers face, and then we're rocketing across the Sandora.

"It's a miracle! We're running on water!" Usopp awes. Then we start sinking. We start screaming as the water rushes up to meet us. "Some miracle!" Usopp gargles, failing around until he remembers how to swim.

"No use complaining. Just start moving," Zoro grumbles, hoisting Chopper up onto his shoulders.

"Aren't there boats or something around here? How wide is this thing anyways?" Usopp grumbles.

"It's about 30 miles," Vivi responds.

"THAT'S WAY TOO FAR TO SWIM!" Usopp screams.

There's loud splashing from in front of us as a giant head pokes through the water, and then a giant fucking Sandora Catfish is staring down at us. "Ah," I deadpan, "that's cool."

The screaming picks up again. We all start swimming away from it as fast as we can as it dives towards us. "Is now a good time to mention that Sandora Catfish love human flesh?!" Vivi screams.

Then there's a loud slamming crack from the Catfish, and it belly-flops into the water defeated as we turn around. Small figures are perched atop the giant fish, and everyone's jaws drop. "It's the Kung Fu Dugongs!" Usopp yells.

Oh, that's what those were.

I'd feel worse about riding the Catfish's unconscious body like a raft being pulled by the Dugongs if it hadn't tried to eat us. The Dugongs are barking and a couple of them wave flags as we coast through the river.

"They say they're just looking out for their fellow pupils," Chopper explains.

"Fellow pupils? It's not like Luffy is our master…" Usopp mutters.

"Are you really going to argue right now? They're saving our asses," I scoff, laying back and crossing my arms beneath my head. "We probably won't hit the other bank for another hour or so. I'm taking a fucken nap."

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It does take an hour. Maybe. I'm shaken awake however long later by Nami. "C'mon. We gotta get going, still a long way to Alubarna," she says, tugging me to my feet, grabbing my case, and helping me off the Catfish while I rub my eyes.

As we pass the Dugongs onto the shore, something catches said eyes. I pause to turn and look at the long metal case one of the Dugongs is holding while waving us off. "...Hey Nami," I start. "You met these guys when we got off the ship at Erumalu, right?"

She hums in confirmation. "Why?"

I point to the Dugong. “He has my cannon.” Did this little motherfucker steal it off the goddamn ship? I stomp up to the shit and stare down at it. “Gimme that back,” I demand. The Dugong looks up at me, puts the case down behind itself, and puts its dukes up. “Oh you wanna fight me for it? Huh? That what you want, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle reject?” I spit, putting my fists up and hopping from foot to foot.

“Ed you moron, don’t fucking fight that thing! It beat up Usopp already!” Nami groans.

“Or do. I think some asskicking to humble you would be good for your ego,” Zoro scoffs.

I stare intently at the Dugong. “I will crush you,” I promise. The Dugong barks and gives me a solemn nod.

Time to employ the greatest of ye olde strategy. I didn’t read The Art of War for nothing.

I point behind the Dugong with a horrified look. “Look over there!” I cry. The Dugong whips around to see what I’m talking about. I whack it over the head as hard as I can. It falls to the ground, defeated. I pick up my case and trot back to my gobsmacked friends.

I pop it open and squish my cheek into my beloved cannon. “Ah how I’ve missed you!” I weep, running my hands along the barrel. All my friends regard me with the same appalled look. “What? It’s my cannon! Fuck right off!” I shout, snapping it back shut.

There’s a bark behind me, and when I turn the Dugong I demolished is bowing at me. I blink.

“He says he is now your faithful disciple and wishes to learn all your strategies,” Chopper explains.

I blanche. “Uh. Yeah no. I don’t take on students and the only things I could teach you would get you arrested.”

“He says that’s not a problem,” Chopper translates for me when the Dugong starts barking again.

I shake my head. “Nope. No way. Buuuut…” I look at my cases contemplatively. “How about this, you take this case of important shit back to our ship, and I’ll consider your tutelage complete. Sound good?” I hold out my case of money from the casino. Nami makes a wounded sound and I roll my eyes. “I’m not carrying this into battle, you psychopath. So how about it?”

The Dugong bows, barks, and holds out his flippers. “He says that sounds like a fair trade to him. He promises not to fail you. He called you master,” Chopper translates again.

I make a face at the title, but place my case in his little flippers ceremoniously. “I shall entrust this to you, then.” With a final solemn nod shared between us, the Dugong is taking off down the Sandora away from us and the other Dugongs.

We stare after it for a second. “That’s one way to deal with extra baggage,” Zoro intones, turning on his heel while the rest of us start walking.

And with a wave goodbye to the Dugongs, we get back to trekking through the desert. Or at least, we do until Nami whips her head to the side with a gasp. “What’s that?” she shouts, pointing toward some kind of dust cloud coming towards us.

“Don’t tell me it’s Baroque Works!” Usopp shrieks, tucking himself behind an irritated Zoro.

Vivi’s jaw drops. “No! It’s Karoo, and the Supersonic Duck Squadron!”

Indeed, Karoo and a group of six other ducks come skidding to a stop in front of us, matching salutes raised as Vivi rushes forward to greet them.

I throw my head back and laugh. “Guess we’ll be making it to Alabasta on time after all!”

Chapter End Notes

Ed the entire Alabasta trip: let’s go beat up Crocodile
Ed as soon as someone is gonna go beat up Crocodile: WAIT NO

My classes go to SEVEN AT GODDAMN NIGHT. So Wednesday updates may be earlier in the day than usual from now on.

Chapter 39: Chapter Thirty Nine: Stay Soft, Get Beaten

Chapter Summary

> *Stay Soft - Mitski*
>
> I stare him down. “Seems so. You’ll have to forgive me.” I kick the end of my cannon case and sling it over my shoulder, a la Wolfwood, and smirk at him. “Let’s rock, dreamgirl.”

Chapter Notes

> This was literally one of the worst weeks of my life. I had a constant migraine the whole time, why the hell did I pay to go to college? (It was actually fine in retrospect but while it was happening I was quite unhappy.)
>
> And in the midst of this terrible time my stupid ass went YOU KNOW WHAT WOULD BE GREAT? WRITING AND POSTING A WHOLE NEW FIC!
> So uh, if you wanna go read that it exists. It's completely unrelated to this fic and just a Sanji introspective thing but eh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You got a plan, Vives?” I ask from the duck I find myself astride. For some unearthly reason the goddamn camel gets a whole duck to himself, so I’ve got Chopper tucked in front of me on the saddle, and my cannon case settled and strapped behind me.

Vivi gives me a bright smile full of mischief from atop Karoo. “You bet your ass I do!” The smile drops just as quickly as it spread. “Ah! But only if you guys are ok with it!”

Half of us scoff and the rest groan. “Stop second guessing yourself! I asked ‘cause I wanted to hear it!” I jeer good-naturedly.

She laughs and rubs the back of her neck. “Sorry, sorry. Old habits.” Then she’s reaching back to riffle through a bag. “I picked up these cloaks, and I think they’re gonna come in

handy. I'd like to cause a diversion so I can speak with the rebels undisturbed, if you guys don't mind playing decoy."

Aw, I'm so proud of her for putting herself first in a plan! She's *growing!*

"So we all put on identical cloaks and pretend to be you?" Sanji muses. "Brilliant, to be sure, but with our… different builds… will that work?" Good question from the cook.

"If we freak them out enough, they'll never know," I say with a shrug. "These ducks are the fastest animals in Alabasta, right? If we zoom past them, I don't think they'll even notice."

"Fair enough. So we just charge at the officer agents with wild abandon and hope they follow us?" Zoro asks.

Vivi nods. "That's the hope."

I nod as well. "When people are panicked or in a state of shock, they won't be able to react correctly for say… twenty seconds. If we can draw them away in that time, we're set. At that point we can split off and fight these fuckers to our hearts content, and Vives can smack some sense into the rebels."

She chuckles. "I probably won't be smacking anybody, but I appreciate the sentiment regardless."

I shrug. "Smacking may do you some good. At the very least a megaphone, if you've got one in that bag of yours."

She raises an eyebrow. "Why a megaphone?"

I turn my head away. "I just want to make sure they hear you. That they listen." Silence spreads through the group. I turn back and everyone is staring at me with a mix of guilt and

pity. I blink. “Jesus Christ guys, lighten up. I’m not mad, I’m being funny,” I snort. There’s a few relieved laughs.

I crack my knuckles and close my eyes, handing the reins to Chopper for a moment and drawing on my memory of what happens next. “Ok, here’s how I think we should split off…”

_____

It’s under cloaks and arranged in the order I specified that we ride up to the west gate at sunrise, minus Vivi and the camel.

Mr. 4 shoots an explosive tennis ball at us, which is dodged fairly easily, then Chopper (who is on his own duck now) and Usopp break off towards the south with Usopp shooting a burning projectile towards Mr. 1 as he goes. Mr. 4 and Miss Merry Christmas follow them.

Nami and Zoro barrel right through the west gate next, Mr. 1 and Miss Doublefinger giving chase behind. Me and Sanji shoot off for the south-west gate, Sanji and his duck trampling Bon Clay as we zoom right up the stairs and into the city.

“Remember, Sanji, if this fucker turns into a girl you’re gonna be fucken useless to me. So be ready to double back and assist someone else, aight? Vives may need help,” I mumble over as we race through the streets.

He looks ready to protest for a second before snapping his jaw shut and reluctantly nodding his head. “I still don’t like that part of the plan, but if you think it’s best…”

We both come to a skidding halt around a corner. Bon Clay stops behind us, huffing and puffing from the run. I wink at Sanji and we’re both tugging off our hoods. I stick out my tongue and toss Bon Clay a peace sign.

“Too bad,” me and Sanji say in unison, “wrong guess!”

Bon Clays jaw drops. “You’re—!”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Sorry, doll! I hate for this to be how we’re meeting again, but it is what it is,” I throw a look at Sanji, ignoring the forming pit in my stomach. “Get a move on, Romeo. You go for that assist, I’m cool here.”

Sanji hesitates. “Are you sure you’re sure..? I truly do hate leaving you by your lonesome, and I could take this guy easy if you want to take a break—”

I cut him off with a cackle. “Move your ass, gorgeous. I wanna actually do something instead of getting fucked by this trip before it’s done. And there’s a lady out there who actually needs your help.”

This is a fucking terrible idea. Usopp got fucken *one shot* by this dude. Bon Clay was an even match for Sanji for a good chunk of their fight, even without his advantage. I might just be setting myself up for failure.

Sanji seems to agree. “I don’t know—”

I cut him off again by hopping off my duck and planting one end of my case in the sandy ground at my side. “Scram, angel eyes. I’ll start throwing shit at you, I’m not kidding,” I say with a smirk, eyes trained on Bon Clay who seems more confused by the second.

Sanji takes another long moment to hesitate. Then he deflates with a sigh, taking a hit off his cigarette. “Fine. But if you need my assistance in the slightest, you only need to shout for me. I’ll hear you.”

I don’t bother turning as I hear Sanji and his duck retreating. “Yeah, I know.” I murmur. “You can go too.” I add for the duck that’s been carting me around. He squawks, then takes off down the narrow streets.

Bon Clay straightens up from where he was hunched catching his breath, looking no less bewildered with Sanji's timely departure. "Hm. So it seems we meet again, my friend. Though this time as enemies," he huffs.

I stare him down. "Seems so. You'll have to forgive me." I kick the end of my cannon case and sling it over my shoulder, a la Wolfwood, and smirk at him. "Let's rock, dreamgirl."

Bon Clay's painted lips quirk up. "Sorry, I prefer classical."

Ok, a head on fight probably won't go my way. Distance is my best bet.

With that in mind, I give him another peace sign and spin on my heel, running off into the narrow streets as fast as I can. I hear Bon Clay squawk behind me, then the rhythmic sound of his ballet shoes slapping on the pavement.

I twist and duck through alleys, jumping carts and knocking over my fair share of barrels in the abandoned streets. When I reach a nice junction, I skid to a stop on my knees and plonk down my case, popping the clasps and hastily loading it before hefting it onto my shoulder and aiming it at the entrance to the corner.

I pause when I hear Zoro's voice call out to me, "Ed, you psycho! Stop running!" The man himself barrels around the corner and stops when he sees me with the cannon. "I forgot you had that. Quit running like a maniac so we can stick together," he grumbles, then he flashes me his arm bandage.

I nod. "Ah. Yeah. Hey Zoro, do you remember the passcode? My stupid ass forgot it because whatever you came up with was so stupid." Does this asshole think I'm fucking dumb?

He shrugs. "Not my fault you can't remember it. Not like it matters much now."

I smile at him. "You're right. It doesn't really matter." And I shoot my cannon at him.

The cannon ball slams into his stomach. Bon Clay, because he morphs back to Bon Clay when he folds him half and his left hand slaps onto his face, squawks and stares at me in blatant shock. “What gave it away?!”

I load a second cannon ball. “Zoro never voluntarily wants to spend time with me! Besides, *I* came up with the passcode! And it was brilliant!” I holler, adjust and shoot again. The recoil is straining my shoulder barely enough to hurt, though I imagined it would be worse if I wasn’t braced on the ground.

Bon Clay twirls around the shot, and seems to get his wits back. “Ah! You’re good! Too bad, I like for us queers to stick together,” he says, getting into a karate-esque stance.

I roll my eyes, loading up another cannonball. “That’s kinda hard when half the fuckers involved in this conflict are fruity.”

He barks out a laugh before his jaw drops. “You got the vibe from Crocodile too?!”

I grin. “Yes! I’m not crazy, there’s *something* going on there!”

He nods emphatically, lunging forward with a spinning kick. “You didn’t hear this from me, but Crocodile wears lifts in his shoes.”

I laugh and roll under his leg, pointing my cannon using the ground as leverage and fire. He does this crazy spin flip and doges, making a nearby building lose a corner in a spray of bricks.

I cringe. Oops. I hope this country has good infrastructure…

“I’m sorry to have to do this, but Mr. 0 put you right near the top of the hit list. I really don’t know what you could have done to make him so mad,” Bon Clay says, violently spinning

towards me. My dodge isn't quick enough and he lands a bruising kick into my thigh, then launches a second attack.

I tuck and roll again, bumping into the wall and barely ducking under a kick that breaks stone. "I ran my mouth, as usual. Hey, think you could just quit Baroque Works and let me do what I gotta do?" I ask, sliding across the ground back to my case and grabbing the rest of the cannonballs to tuck them into various pockets.

Bon Clay launches another kick at me that embeds his foot in yet another wall, he tugs it for a second and realizes it's stuck. "Unfortunately that doesn't seem to be an option at the moment, no joke."

I take the momentary reprieve as an opportunity to load some black powder down the barrel of my cannon before sliding the cannonball down. I fire the shot at Bon Clay as soon as I flip the lever.

God has decided he hates me however, because Bon Clay manages to get free just before the projectile hits him. It blasts into the half wall and shattered stone goes exploding everywhere. It also sends me sliding back a few inches because of the increased recoil with the black powder.

I load and fire another shot at his head as he gets back to his feet. His leg comes swinging up, and I'm forced to hit the deck as he kicks the cannonball right back at me. "That's really impressive leg strength!" I cry, scooting back across the sandy ground.

Bon Clay laughs, doing a twirl. "Why thank you! I've spent many meticulous years perfecting my Okama Kenpo!" The twirl turns into this weird spinning double kick that I take to the back. I slam into and break a barrel, then crash down onto my knees with a grunt and scuttle forward to get some distance.

Another cannonball is loaded down the barrel. "It really does show!" I have got to stop wasting my goddamn ammo on pointless attacks. I take a quick assessing glance around the little junction we're fighting in.

The debris from the barrel I broke, some more barrels, a wagon with some sacks on it, a fuckton of rubble around… Yeah that's not a lot to work with. I wonder what's in those sacks though, if I luck out and it's flour or something…

I'm distracted from that train of thought by Bon Clay lunging towards me with a couple palm strikes that I narrowly dodge. Fuck it, it'll have to do.

I'm slammed in the chest by a kick and fall back on my ass. I take a peek at the wagon from behind Bon Clay as he comes back in for a wide sweeping kick. I roll back on the ground, bumping into the fucking walls that are goddamn everywhere (note to self, stop fighting in enclosed spaces,) and grimace.

I kick off the wall and slide across the ground closer to the wagon, pretty much skinning my knees on the rough ground to pass under another of Bon Clay's kicks, and fire my cannon into it when I'm close enough. The thing fucking explodes. Some kind of powder, I've got no clue what it is, clouds the air.

I lose sight of Bon Clay for a second, and fully take advantage of the fact he can't see me. I pray for a second that it actually isn't flour because if it is, this will genuinely kill me. I load black powder, and fire my cannon straight up into the air.

Thankfully, I don't explode.

Not flour or sugar, got it. Either would have blown me back to kingdom come.

"What the hell?" Bon Clay squawks from somewhere to my left. I try to quietly slide further away, but am once again bitchslapped by fate and trip over a chunk of rock and go sprawling on the ground with a shriek.

"There you are," his voice says ominously. Through the haze I can see Bon Clay's leg come careening toward me at a speed that will undoubtedly shatter my fucking skull.

I do what I can.

I hoist up my cannon in front of me, and his leg impacts. The cannon bends like a cheap pipe cleaner, and the kick barely misses taking my head off my shoulders. I stare at my weapon in horror.

“You… You broke my cannon…” I whisper slowly.

Bon Clay strikes a pose and *laughs*. “Aha! Yes, my Okama Kenpo is extremely powerful! Cannons and weapons of all types crumple like paper before my glory! No joke!”

My chuckle starts low. It builds, slowly edging from incredulous to unhinged. Bon Clay stops laughing with me at some point. I slowly tilt my head up to meet his eyes. Whatever he sees in mine makes him gulp.

“I really liked that cannon,” I tell him.

He gives me a fearful and shaky smile. “It was a very nice cannon?”

I press a kiss to the destroyed barrel, then lay it on the ground “Goodnight, my sweet prince,” I whisper. My final unusable cannonball sits heavy in my pocket. I get to my feet. “Alright,” I say calmly, “show me your next trick.”

Bon Clay hesitates. “U — uh alright! I once fought a foe who couldn’t bring himself to harm a friend! Not to mention a princess!” Then his right hand meets his face and I’m staring into Vivi’s eyes. I look at him impassively. “Aahah! I bet you can't even imagine harming a hair on the princesses head!” she cackles, hands flapping.

“Hm. Yeah, I can see how this would deter some people,” I say mildly. Bon Clay cackles. I take a couple steps forward, a wicked grin crawling up my face. “I’m not some people.” I wind my fist up. “I DON’T HAVE TO FEEL BAD ABOUT THIS!” I yell.

And then I deck her as hard as I can.

She shrieks as her head snaps to the side, left hand slapping up into where I hit as she transforms back into regular Bon Clay. “What the hell?! You would just hit your friend like that!?” he cries.

I take another wild swing at him. “We beat each other up in the desert no less than 48 hours ago! And besides, you ain’t her! I don’t care whose face you’re wearing, it doesn’t change who you are!”

He blinks rapidly at me. “Well that’s a nice sentiment.” Then he spins out a kick at my face. I duck under it and pull out my pistol. The shot I fire blows right through his robe but fails to hit anything of actual import.

Six shots left.

I spare a glance upward. What is taking so fucking long?!

A blow glances off my cheekbone. I spin into a roll and fire a shot aiming for his knee. It actually takes out one of the swans on the shoulders of his robe. So hurrah for my shit aim.

Five shots left.

Bon Clay is not impressed by this. “STOP SHOOTING MY ROBE!” he screeches, pirouetting towards me menacingly.

“I’M AIMING FOR YOUR LEGS!” I yell back, somersaulting across the junction. My third shot is fired into the wall because I completely fucking miss. I really thought I was getting better at this…

Four shots left.

Bon Clay drops into a crouch, one leg arch in front of him. “I think it’s time we wrapped this up, then.”

I take another peek at the sky and smirk at him. “I couldn’t agree more,” I blow him a kiss.

He raises an eyebrow, confused, before the cannonball I fired into the sky crashes down on his head. He makes a choked noise and there’s silence for a second. Then he pitches forward and faceplants into the ground.

I blink. “That was easy.”

I heave in a breath and turn to stare forlornly at my destroyed cannon. My poor baby…

Shit, now I’ve gotta go get my ass to the plaza. I let my fingers dance across my bruising cheekbone as I turn on my heel. That fucken *hurt.*

It didn’t hurt nearly as much as the kick that buries itself in my side with so much force I go flying across the junction. I slam into one of the buildings, crushing an inch or so into the stonework while my spine arches and a choked scream forces itself through my lips alongside a mouthful of blood when my teeth sink into the meat of my cheek.

When the white nothing clears from my eyes, I can see Bon Clay standing triumphantly with a big ol’ goose egg on his head looking equal parts pleased and pissed. The singular remaining swan that was on his shoulder is now on one of his still outstretched feet.

“Dude,” I hack hoarsely, “I think you switched my kidneys.”

“I’m honestly amazed you survived that. I kick lethally, no joke. These swans break steel.” he responds. “You’re lucky that was a blunt hit, a pointed attack from these babies is like a

bullet from a rifle!”

“Yeah, well I’ve learned I’m pretty shit at dying when people want me to,” I wheeze out, more blood sliding down my chin. Jesus, I might be missing a chunk from my cheek.

I jerk my arms out of the stonework and stumble onto my feet. A glance behind reveals a comical Looney Toons ass hole in the wall the shape of my body. Jesus Christ.

“Ok,” I say hoarsely, “where were we?”

“Fighting, I believe,” Bon Clay sings, giving me barely enough time to roll out of the way of three consecutive kicks. A fourth kick comes at me from a different angle and I’m forced to put my hands up to block.

It hurts. I skid a couple feet across the dusty ground with a grunt. I think something just shifted in my wrist sweet god, at least it was my left instead of my right that took the brunt of the force. I aim and fire my pistol with my right, which just barely grazes his hairpiece, and take a few quick paces away from him.

Three shots left.

It doesn't help. He comes charging at me in a few swift long legged strides, the foot without the swan coming up to land a heavy blow above my right ear. My head jerks to the side and I stumble a few steps into the wall.

I blink the stars out of my eyes just in time to get a front row seat to watch him nail a devastating kick into my stomach that has me heaving and flying into another fucking wall, this time blowing right through the damn thing and tumbling out onto another street.

I groan into the ground, fingers twitching over my gun while my ears ring. This *sucks*. Good god, why did I send Sanji away? He’s mopping the goddamn floor with me!

I push myself up with my fists and grit my teeth. Blood runs down from my hair and splashes onto the street. I spit out another mouthful with a cough. “Shit—” Uuuugh everything tastes like blood, this sucks ass. There’s sand digging into the raw parts of my knees. Fighting *blows.*

“Are you done already?” Bon Clays voice rings from the fucking hole I busted in the building beside me. I do a double take. Oh my god I shot through a whole fucking *LIVING ROOM.* ***OOOW*** .

I grin a smile full of bloody teeth at him as he steps into the street. “Not on your life. Taking you out is my responsibility, I’ll see it through no matter the cost.”

Bon Clay’s smile is wide. “You have quite the spirit! Your soul is strong, I can tell!”

I get to my feet, stumbling and wobbling but raising my pistol regardless. “It better be, I’ve put it through a lot of shit,” I mumble through red stained lips. I fire, hitting abso-fucking-lutely nothing because I probably have HEAD TRAUMA.

Two shots left.

“I think you have a strong soul, too,” I tell him, almost falling on my ass trying to dodge a palm strike.

“Oh yeah?” he replies, taking another swing that I barely manage to duck under.

I nod with a slightly dazed smile. “Yeah. Even when you gotta switch your face. Does your power make you more comfortable with yourself?” I can’t believe I’m one of those comic relief characters who does banter and deep talk during fights. I always knew I’d end up here…

Bon Clay's laugh is spiteful. "As much as it can, I suppose."

I jump over a low kick and my head goes spinning. I stumble back a few steps with a groan. "Mhm. No matter how you look, you'll never get everyone to see you as you like," I mumble while trying to fire another shot, but my finger slips off the trigger. That can't be good… "S'fine though."

Bon Clay pauses for a second. "How do you mean?"

I shrug, a breath rattling through my lungs. "Don't need everyone's approval when the people who matter know who you are. I got my Captain and crew, that's good enough for me. You've got someone like that, right?"

His face pinches. My mouth drops into a soft O. "That's fine too. You got me then. I see you, Bon. And I think you're pretty damn cool."

His eyes widen and I smile, something big and bright and reminiscent of my Captain. I steady my finger and fire my second last shot into a sign above him. It crashes down behind him and he whips his head around.

Got em.

I pull my last cannonball out. I wind it up like a baseball pitch, or a snowball. And in what I can only describe as the unholy love child of Beat Sabre and Duck Hunt, I see lit up the path I need to throw to end this fucking fight.

There's barely any time to relish in Bon Clay's surprised look before the cannonball slams into his forehead and he's collapsing to the ground in a pile of twitching limbs. There's a long moment of silence.

I suck in a long breath before wrapping my arms around my stomach with a groan. "Ow ow *ow!"*

“Just finish me off. Baroque Works will punish me for failing if you don’t,” Bon Clay mumbles from the ground.

I scoff. “Fuck that. We’re friends, right? So even if we kick each other's asses, we’ll still meet again one day to party or fight side by side. Them’s the breaks when you’re pals with a Strawhat Pirate.” He blinks up at me with watery eyes. I grin down at him. “I’ve got shit to do, so I’ll see ya later. Try to stay out of the way for the rest of this fight, yeah? I don’t wanna have to knock you out.”

With that I spin my pistol and holster it, then turn on my heel to stalk towards the plaza.

That could’ve gone better.

I wipe some blood from the corner of my mouth.

Could’ve also gone worse.

Chapter End Notes

I was so close to just having Ed gets absolutely DESTROYED the whole fight and have Bon take pity on them but... Oh my baby deserves to be cool. Don't @ me.

We're closing in on the end of the saga! Three more chapters and the last two are 5k each. Haha.

Chapter 40: Chapter Forty: I Hope We Live To Tell The Tale

Chapter Summary

Shout - Tears for Fears

“Fuck!” I grunt, collapsing against a wall for the fourth time in a row, arms gingerly squeezed around my middle at the feeling of my ribs rubbing together. “This is the worst…” I whine into dusty brick, sweaty forehead no doubt leaving a weird mark on it.

Chapter Notes

Lil warning for the chapter ahead; if you're uncomfy with murder, um. Well.

Anyways. Art school is fun because I have to go draw naked people in a couple hours and try not to burst into nervous giggles because that would be terrible for everyone involved.

Also sometimes y’all just guess shit right in the comments and I gotta keep my ass quiet cause because I don’t wanna spoil anything lmao. You also say some incredibly incorrect things and those are arguably funnier.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fuck!” I grunt, collapsing against a wall for the fourth time in a row, arms gingerly squeezed around my middle at the feeling of my ribs rubbing together. “This is the worst…” I whine into dusty brick, sweaty forehead no doubt leaving a weird mark on it.

My fucken knees hurt (I’m never gonna be able to wear these pants again, between the blood and the distinct lack of material around my knees), my left hand hurts and my wrist clicks every time I move it, my head is throbbing and a whole slew of other issues are ruining my ability to get to the plaza. Or the palace? Was I supposed to go to the palace..?

I’ll find out when I fucking get there.

I groan again and push off the wall. My head is spinning and I'm 80% sure I've got a concussion or some shit.

I barely make it down another street before my useless goddamn feet trip on fucking NOTHING and I tip forward with no hope of saving myself from an ungraceful faceplant.

Turns out I don't have to. Thin arms latch around my shoulders and tug me upwards as Nami's exhausted voice creeps into my ears. "What the shit happened to you?"

I grin up at her scuffed and bloody face and let her presence seep into my skin like a salve. "I could ask you the same," I mumble. "What, did you fight a sea urchin?" Because her everything is covered in holes.

She throws her head back with a groan, righting me on my feet. "May as well have. That Doublefinger chick was a real piece of work, I tell you that."

Her skirt is a whole foot shorter than it had been this morning, with quite a few of those aforementioned holes and big tears in the remaining fabric, and the missing foot of it is wrapped around one of her ankles and is absolutely soaked in blood.

"Christ, I think I got off easy compared to you," I say incredulously.

She scoffs and hooks one of my arms over her shoulders. "You obviously can't see yourself. What, did a building get dropped on you?"

"Actually I got kicked *through* a building. And into several walls," I respond, twisting my arm so it's under her shoulders and I'm the one supporting her while we walk.

She shoots me a look. "Yeah, I think I'm fine with what I got. Where's your cannon?"

My face crumples. "I don't want to talk about it."

Something falls out of the alley we're passing and almost trips and kills us. Both me and Nami shriek as we stop, the bloodied and slashed to hell body of Zoro slumped on the ground in front of us.

"...Is he dead?" Nami whispers, poking at him with the tip of her sandal.

Zoro makes a low groan, swinging up a thumbs up.

"Nah, he's fine," I respond, bending over to roll him over. His face is stuck in a grimace and he looks like he got chewed up by a meat grinder. There's so much blood on his front he left a Zoro shaped imprint of it on the ground. "Nevermind," I deadpan.

He groans again. "I'm fine," he wheezes. "Let's go to the plaza now, I can walk."

Me and Nami both give him doubtful looks. "Dude, you look like you left your soul behind three blocks ago. Walking is out of the question," I say slowly.

He gives me a disgruntled look. "How the fuck else am I gonna got there? You're not rolling me all the way there."

I crouch down and turn to Nami. "Get his bitchass on my back," I command.

Nami blinks at me while Zoro makes protesting noises. "...Didn't you just say you got kicked through a building? And you wanna carry *his* heavy ass?" she asks incredulously.

I nod. "Yessir. I'll carry you too if you want, walking on that ankle's gotta hurt like a bitch."

She gets a concerned twist to her mouth. "Ed… You're pretty beat up…"

I shoot her a look and wiggle my arms. “I’m fine, especially compared to you fuckers. Now c’mon, this grass stain isn't gonna lug himself onto my back.”

There’s a long moment of hesitation. Nami sighs. “Fuck, alright.”

Zoro makes some very unflattering squawks and grumbles as he’s manhandled onto my back. I can very quickly feel blood soak into my shirt and take a second to mourn its loss. I really did like this shirt…

I pop up onto my feet and turn back to Nami. “Alright doll face, what’s your preferred method of transport? Reverse piggyback? Princess carry? On my hip like a kid? Fireman might be awkward with Zoro back there, but we can try.”

Her face scrunches. “I’ll just walk, I don’t wanna make this,” she gestures to my everything, “worse.”

I glare at her. “Just think about how upset Chopper would be if he found out you were walking on that injury. So I *said* what kind of carry you want.”

She looks away and juts out her lip. “...Princess carry,” she mumbles.

I give her a bright smile. “Wonderful! You’re gonna have to tie Zoro to me, or like… hold him on. I’m gonna feel like shit if I drop him.”

_____

“Put me down,” Zoro demands for the eighth goddamn time in the past minute. “You’re going the wrong way.”

“Shut up!” me and Nami snap at the same time.

“The second we let you down, you’ll go running off and we won’t find your goofy ass again until after the fighting is over!” Nami groans, reaching around my neck to flick Zoro on the face.

“And honestly, I’m a little worried you might pass out from blood loss if you try walking,” I add.

“I’m fine! I could fight Crocodile myself right now!” he grumbles.

“Darlin’ you couldn’t fight the forces of gravity. Shut your ass up,” I reply with zero hesitation. Nami snickers into my neck.

“Hey! I think that’s the plaza up ahead!” Nami suddenly calls, pointing to an upcoming exit from the back alleys I’ve been running through.

Indeed, there’s very loud sounds of fighting and a few explosions, and I can see the retaining wall and staircase that leads up to the palace through the dust storm that seems to be gathering.

Then, like a bullhorn in a Walmart, I hear Luffy’s voice. My head snaps in the direction it came from and before I even process it, my feet are carrying the lot of us in his direction.

I hear Usopp’s yelling before I see anyone. My feet pick up speed until I’m sprinting through the throng of fighting rebels and soldiers. Nami grabs onto my shoulders for dear life and Zoro’s head bonks into the back of my skull.

“Slow the fuck down, are you crazy?!” Nami shrieks.

I pay her no heed. I skid to a stop a few feet away from the reunion. “WHAT’S UP FUCKERS?! MISS US?!” I scream, smile so wide my cheeks hurt. Chopper and Usopp both yelp in surprise at our entrance.

“Vivi! What happened, you’re hurt!” Nami calls over, relief clear in her tone. She jumps out of my arms to run toward Vivi.

“Nami! Ed! Mr. Bushido!” Vivi cries, running toward Nami with open arms. Nami leaps into her with no regard for her fucked foot. I turn away from them to look at the rest of my friends.

“Good lord Usopp, the fuck happened to you?” I ask with a loud laugh, bounding over to them while Zoro groans from my back.

“Ed!” Usopp yells, hobbling toward me in his full body bandaged… cacoon thing. “What the hell happened to *you?!* You look like a crime scene! And why does Zoro look like a *corpse?!”*

I let Zoro slide to his wobbly ass feet so I can pull Chopper into a hug. “Duuuuuude!” I groan. “I’m never fighting in the streets again, there’s too much shit to get kicked into!” Chopper wiggles in my arms with a sniffle. “I kept both of these jackasses off their feet, so you’re welcome!”

“By the state of you, you shouldn't be on your feet either!” he wails. I scoff and pat him on the back.

“Ed my dear, I knew I shouldn’t have left when you said! Now look at you!” Sanji, who has a few scrapes and bruises but no major injuries, wails. “Hey! Why’re Nami and Ed injured?! And why were you getting lugged around?” he demands, turning to Zoro who is huffing breath and swaying back and forth.

“They’re fine,” he wheezes.

“What happened on your end? Did Vivi get to the rebels?” I ask Sanji, furrowing my brow at all the fighting. That doesn’t bode well for his answer.

Sanji grimaces. “I got her to Koza, but uh. Let’s just say communications broke down, through no fault of anyone *actually* involved.” Ah shit, I guess those Baroque moles are better at their jobs then I gave them credit for.

“Usopp! We’re having a chat about the functionality of party favours after this!” Nami shouts, one arm around Vivi and the other pointing dramatically at the heavily bandaged boy.

“But it worked, didn’t it?” Usopp responds, a shaky smile and a thumbs up tossed at her.

“Guys,” Luffy’s voice rings out. Something in my chest loosens. “That guy beat me in the desert, I’m sorry.” His arms are stretched up to the top of the retaining wall and his eyes are shadowed by his hat. “I won’t lose again! So you guys take care of things down here!”

“Go get him, Luffy,” Zoro mutters with a smile.

“If you can’t beat this guy, who can?!” Usopp hollers.

Luffy looks back at us with determined eyes. I meet his gaze head on and give him a wide smile. “Rip him a new one, Captain.”

Luffy grins at me and nods his head. “Let’s end this, once and for all!” he yells.

An explosion rocks the plaza behind us as we all shouts in acquiesce, “YEAH!” Then Luffy is rocketing up the wall and screaming.

I spin to my comrades and clap. “Alright cocksuckers, we got a bomb to deal with!” Half the group squawk at the cocksucker part, and the rest start freaking out about the bomb part. “Rather than running through the city like headless chickens, let’s figure out where it is first!”

Pell, who has been standing silent beside Vivi this whole time and is covered in sand and bruises, pipes up. “Princess Vivi said to check the clock tower.”

Vivi glances at him then back at me. “Yeah, that was Ed’s idea. Me, Koza, and the Sand Clan used to play in it as kids. It has lots of empty space, so the cannoneer may very well be hiding in there.”

I nod. “Got it. So let’s head there and beat up this cannoneer. Also, the bomb probably has a few failsafes, so unless any of you are secretly bomb techs and didn’t tell me, that’ll be a problem.”

Nami raises an eyebrow. “Failsafes? What kind of failsafes?”

“Well, Crocodile point blank told us he had major trust issues, so he probably either has a remote detonator himself, or he has a way for it to operate without the cannoneer. In the case of a detonator, Luffy will stop him. He’s great like that. But if there’s a timer or something…” I trail off.

Wait—

FUCK.

WE DON’T KNOW HOW TO DEFUSE THE BOMB.

I smack my hand over my mouth and drop into a crouch. “Oh my god we’re all gonna get blown up because of my poor planning!” I screech.

Zoro smacks me over the head. “Calm the fuck down, why are you freaking out? It’ll all work out.”

I shoot a glare back at him. “Uh maybe, but I don’t want it to be at the cost of our lives! You think you’re directionally challenged ass could reprogram or disarm a bomb? I doubt you could even find the wiring!”

“Leave it to me,” Usopp suddenly blurts out. We all turn to him and the few parts of his face that aren’t bandaged up turn bright red. “Uh — That is — I mean… Um. I — I could maybe take a look at it…” he mumbles, eyes darting anywhere but ours.

There’s a short second of silence.

“Fucken sure,” Zoro grunts.

“Sounds good,” Sanji says with a thumbs up.

“You can do it!” Chopper cheers.

“If anyone can…” Nami trails off with a shrug.

“You got this, Usopp!” Vivi says with a smile.

I give him a wide grin. “Then that’s settled! It’s in your hands, Brave Warrior!”

Usopp’s face drains of blood. “I SAID MAYBE! You all have way too much faith!” he yelps.

I snort. “Fuck off. Ok sailors, move out!”

There’s a resounding “right!” from everyone, and then we’re turning to start running into the city. Zoro collapses on his third step. We turn back to stare at him as he twitches on the street.

“...Is he ok?” Vivi mumbles.

“He’s fine,” Sanji replies, kicking him in the shoulder lightly. Zoro groans.

“Alright, maybe someone should carry him!” I announce.

“Who, though?” Chopper asks, looking around the group with wide eyes.

We all unanimously look toward the least injured of us, Sanji, as he lights a cigarette. He glances up at us and blinks. “What? No! I am a ladies, and Ed, only transport system! I don’t cart around lumps of moss!” he yelps.

Nami leans her chin on my shoulder and pinches my arm. She blinks big brown eyes at him and I take it as my cue to do the same. “Please, Sanji? We really need you to carry him,” she asks sweetly.

Sanji’s face lights up red. “Whatever you want! I’ll do whatever you want!” he cries, picking Zoro up and tossing him over his shoulder.

“What?! Hey, put me the fuck down!” Zoro screeches.

“Nope! My sweet Nami asked me to, so I’ll carry you as long as she wants! Now shut up and be a good passenger!” he snaps, hefting him up higher when Zoro grunts from the pressure on his stomach.

“Ok, move out for real this time!” I order, pointing toward the clock tower.

There’s another yell of agreement from the group. We all turn once again, but then a group of four Baroque Works agents are lunging at Vivi. Sanji steps in between them, and in a flash

they're all on the ground and Zoro has somehow managed to draw his swords and actually fucking use them from his place on Sanji's shoulder.

Another large group of agents are closing in behind the first. "We have ten minutes, right? How long should this take?" Sanji asks rhetorically.

"Don't waste time talking," Zoro snaps, sliding Wado into his mouth.

"Two seconds," they say in unison. And in the weirdest display of teamwork I've ever seen, the two of them start kicking ass. I have no fucking idea how the hell those idiots are figthing in a position like that, but I'm not willing to think about it harder than I have to.

"Ok, ACTUALLY LEAVING THIS TIME! Sanji! Make sure you don't lose that dumbass!" I holler, spinning and taking off through the dust cloud.

———

The way to the clocktower is… Ok I don't want to say it, but it's fucking dusty and I was in the front so…

"Ed, you fucking idiot, when did you sense of direction get as bed as Zoro's?!" Nami screams, smacking me over the head the third time I lead us into a dead end.

"It's not my fault! You assholes put me in the front! I have never been here before, and I'm not talented with navigation like you! Why the fuck isn't Vives leading this?!" I screech back.

"I would if you stopped running off ahead!" Vivi shouts from the back.

"For some reason I assumed your group of saviours would be a little more… organized," Pell says slowly from beside her.

“Shut up, pigeon boy! You’re in charge of leading now!” I shout, stomping out of the alley.

Pell stares at me for a long second. I stare back. “I don’t like you very much,” he states, spinning down a street and motioning for us to follow. I throw my hands up and do just that.

With someone who knows what they’re doing leading, we spend significantly less time getting lost. I’m falling near the back of the pack with Nami after a while because holy mother of god my knees and head are starting to hurt.

“Are you — *huff* — ok?” Nami wheezes beside me.

“Ugggh, I’m fine. My head just hurts, I may have a concussion,” I groan back.

Then I’m tackled to the ground from the left. I scream as I go down. I can hear my crewmates yelling in front, but I’m stuck staring up into the eyes of a Baroque Works agent as he stabs down toward me with a knife.

Just before it can connect with my face, he’s smacked in the head with the flat of a katana and goes flying off me. I blink and suck in a breath, then Nami is at my side helping me up. I turn and make eye contact with Tashigi as she kicks down a second agent I hadn’t seen.

She turns to me as she sheathes her sword, then wipes some blood from her face. “Are you alright?” she asks, and uh. Oh my god. She looks like an angel sent down from heaven to save my pathetic ass.

My jaw drops. I blink up at her rapidly and feel my face get hot. “Uhhhhh—” I drone stupidly.

Her face turns concerned. “Um, Detective Domino? Are you ok? Did he hurt you? You guys have to stop that bomb!”

Nami shoves my shoulder and I blink harshly one last time before scrabbling to my feet. “Er — Yeah. I’m fine. Sorry — That was really hot, thanks!” I blurt. Then I run away.

I nearly crash into Usopp in my haste to continue, so I shove him to get him to move. “Why is your face so red? Ed?” he questions, picking up the pace.

Nami comes cackling up on my right. “Ed, that was pathetic! Are you usually that unsmooth?” she wheezes.

I shove my burning face in my hands. “Shut up! Swordswomen are one of my weaknesses!” I whine.

“We’re here!” Pell suddenly yells from ahead of us and we all skid to a stop. We stare up at the tower and the clock, showcasing the six minutes we have until this whole place is fucking obliterated.

I tap Usopp on the shoulder. “Shoot the clock face. Nothing explodey,” I command.

Both Vivi and Pell whip their heads around to me. “Excuse me?! Why?!” Pell squawks.

Usopp doesn't hesitate. He’s got his slingshot out and a projectile flying before Pell can even finish his sentence. The pellet creates a small smoke cloud on impact, but doesn’t do more than superficial damage to the clock.

Vivi shoots me a look. “What was the point of that?” she asks, significantly less heat in her words compared to Pell.

My response is interrupted by a crash. Sanji emerges from a nearby brick wall in a spray of rubble and dust. “I’m here!” he announces, shaking sand and rock out of his hair. We all stare at him for a second.

“...Where’s Zoro?” Nami asks.

Sanji’s face sours. “He ran off.”

“He ran off?” Usopp repeats.

“Damn mosshead jumped off my back and said I was going the wrong way. Now he’s probably lost on the other side of the country,” he says snappily.

I slap a hand down my face. “What part of ‘make sure he doesn't get lost’ sounded optional to you?!”

“What’re you yelling about?” Zoro’s voice asks from my left.

I sigh. “How shit your sense of direction is. Guess we’re just gonna have to pray you show up at some — wait a fucken second,” I whip my head around. Zoro is standing right beside me, still covered in blood and breathing heavily, but staring at me like *I’m* the weird one. I stare at him for a second. “I’m not going to question this,” I say, turning back to the tower.

“So? The clock tower?” Vivi repeats.

I don’t need to answer. The clock face swings open and a froggy head pokes out. “What was that? Someone trying to get our attention? Ribbit ribbit ribbit,” a voice rings out.

“That’s why,” I say, pointing my pistol up at Miss Fathers Day.

I pull the trigger before my hands can start shaking. Miss Fathers Day looks down and makes eye contact with me a split second before my bullet makes a permanent home in her forehead.

Her body falls over the edge and tumbles to the ground, slamming into the pavement in front of us.

My face goes slack.

Oh, that's not where I mean to hit her…

I stare at her crumpled form for a long second. "Nobody say *anything* about how I just murdered that woman in cold blood," I say hauntedly, still staring into her lifeless eyes.

This is gonna hit me like a ton of bricks later.

A hand claps onto my shoulder. "You did what you had to. Now let's fucking move," Zoro states.

"...There's a staircase in the far corner of the first floor. We've gotta book it if we want to make it." Vivi says, only hesitating for a second in the face of a corpse.

I tear my eyes away from the woman and nod. "Ok. Usopp, Vives, Zoro. You're coming up with me. The rest of you are on ground duty," I announce, breaking into a run into the building.

"What's ground duty?!" Nami shouts behind me.

"Keep intruders out and bash Baroque heads!" I shout back, not bothering to turn.

The run up the stairs is tense. I'm running up them two at a time and praying my clumsiness doesn't pick this moment to surface and kill my ass. I keep track of the seconds as we near the top.

“Ed…” Usopp starts somewhere behind me.

“Later,” I cut him off. “If it’s about the lady, talk about it later. If it’s about your ability to do what you need to do up here, shut up.”

“Noted,” he says dryly.

I spot the exit and sprint the last few steps, kicking the door down with as much force as I can muster. As it slams open, the remaining agent turns to me with shock and horror on his face. “You killed Miss Fathers Day!” he shrieks.

Zoro goes shooting past me and swings his sword like a hockey stick, sending Mr. 7 (I think?) flying out of the open clock face with a scream. “Three minutes! Get to work!” Zoro shouts, turning to the giant cannon. We all turn to the contraption as well.

“...Well this thing isn’t terrifying at all,” I say sarcastically, running up to check it out closer up. There’s the fuse, a targeting system, and a wheel I assume controls the elevation. “Alright! Zoro, you try turning that wheel and get this fucker pointed at the sky, and get ready to light the fuse right at the end incase we can’t disarm it. Vives, up top checking its orientation. Usopp, we gotta climb inside this thing and see if we can disarm it,” I order, making my way to the front.

They immediately snap into action. Me and Usopp both climb into the barrel and come face to face with the ticking bomb three times our size. “This seems overkill.” Usopp mutters, taking point in front of the giant clock and handle implanted on its face.

He jams a screwdriver under the clock and pries until it comes out with a neat pop. He passes the clock face back to me and I toss it out of the barrel of the cannon. Then it starts moving, me and Usopp go sliding down into the bomb as the cannon slowly rotates upwards.

“Hey Ed,” Usopp mutters, sticking his hands into the bomb and pulling out wiring to look closer at it, googles slid over his eyes.

“Yeah?” I respond.

“You know if I fail and we gotta fire this thing, this will only kill the people in the barrel. You should just get out,” he continues, pulling a pair of wire cutters and a smaller screwdriving out and sticking his hands back in.

“Nah. I put you in here, I’m suffering the same fate you do,” I state, putting a hand on his shoulder and planting my leg so It’s pressed against his back, comforting but not in the way.

He doesn’t pause in his work, but I do hear a sniffle. “Yeah. Ok,” he says quietly. The ticking continues.

“You having any luck in there?” Zoro shouts from outside the cannon.

“Maybe? I think I can do this,” Usopp calls back, cutting a wire in half and moving onto unscrewing something.

“Great, because you have thirty seconds,” he replies. Usopp tenses under my hand. The ticking suddenly seems much lounder.

“We don’t need a countdown from you! If it hits five seconds, fucking light it! Forget about us and light the sucker!” I yell, nails pinching into Usopp’s bandaged skin.

“Are you really ok with that?” Usopp mumbles again.

“Nope. I wanna live to fulfil my dream,” I answer.

Usopp is silent as he cuts another wire. “Me too,” he whispers. Then he pulls out a black wire and a red wire, and he hesitates. “Um, Ed? I don’t really know which of these I have to cut. It’s a gamble,” he admits.

I grin down at the wiring. “A gamble? How interesting. I always put my money on red,” I laugh.

Usopp takes a deep breath. The ticking feels like a drum beat under my feet. “Live or die, I guess,” he grunts, then cuts the red wire.

The ticking stops.

We both pause for a second.

“Did you get it?” Vivi yells from outside.

Me and Usopp exchange a look, smiles stretching across our faces. “FUCK YEAH WE DID!” we yell in unison.

Usopp jumps up and grabs me in a tight hug, a breathless laugh breaking through his mouth. I clutch him back just as hard. “We’re alive! Oh my god I knew you could do it!” I cheer, burying my face in his hair.

“I did *not* think I could do that! Ah, I can’t stop shaking!” he wheezes back.

“Zoro! Fish us outta here!” I call up the barrel.

Zoro laughs, his head peeking over the edge to look down at us. “Good job, knew you had it in you.”

Usopp’s arms tighten around me. “Hah. Alright, yeah. I did it,” he murmurs.

I can’t do anything but grin.

Chapter End Notes

Ed, feeling like absolute shit after their fight: ow :(
Ed, the second their friends need to be carried around: nevermind let’s go

Am I trying to scam myself into liking Tashigi more by giving Ed the hots for her? Maybe. Shut up. I think her character is so fucking cool but something about her just stops me from liking her, so I'm fixing it.

Also USOPP. I love Usopp. He's so cool and awesome. Let's give it up for Usopp.

Also Ed and Luffy art here.

For the record, Luffy did actually spit on Crocodile and hit him during their first fight. It just didn't really help with the whole 'sandstorm headed for Yuba' thing. Lmao.

Chapter 41: Chapter Forty One: Can You Remember The Rain?

Chapter Summary

Can You Remember the Rain - Garrett Atterberry

A solid wave vertigo washes over me and I stumble in place from the force of it. The ringing gets louder and I can feel nausea flirting with my stomach, so I clasp my hand over my mouth and try to breathe in through my nose.

Chapter Notes

Here's the first of the two 5k monstrosities. Half of this is side quests and the other half is me exploring the dynamics between Ed and other characters. Make of that what you will.

Also NEW MITSKI DROPPED FRIDAY AND UUUUUUH. It's good. It's very good and I've cried every time I've listened to it and I have it on repeat.

You know what else dropped Friday? A BANGER OP EPISODE. I love this stupid fucking show sm T-T.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Zoro helps me and Usopp out of the upturned barrel of the cannon, Vivi is perched up on the open clock face and is staring down at the plaza.

“Why are they still fighting?” she asks, her voice nothing but a breathy whisper.

I tap Usopp on the shoulder and point out the hole. “You have the perfect vantage point, take out as many Baroque Works agents as you can,” I say quietly. He gives me a neat nod before he’s crouching beside Vivi and aiming down his slingshot.

A faint ringing distracts me from them. I turn to the right to see what it is, but the ringing follows my turn.

Ah. Fuck, I don't think that's good.

I bring my hand up to poke at the tender spot above my ear, and my fingers come back slick with blood. I know head wounds bleed a lot, but shouldn't this have clotted by now? It was a blunt goddamn kick!

A solid wave vertigo washes over me and I stumble in place from the force of it. The ringing gets louder and I can feel nausea flirting with my stomach, so I clasp my hand over my mouth and try to breathe in through my nose.

A hand lands on my back and guides me to the floor. "Yeah, alright. Head between your knees, breath in through your nose, out through your mouth. Close your eyes or focus on a spot in the distance," Zoro instructs.

I follow to the best of my ability, eyes shut tight and hands in my hair. "I'm gonna be sick," I groan.

"Mhm. Just keep breathing," Zoro says, slightly exasperated as he takes a seat next to me.

"I think I'm concussed," I moan.

"Probably. I don't know if you noticed, but you weren't running in a straight line the entire time you were with me," he says with an amused lilt.

"Oh and you'd know all about straight lines," I snark, cracking open my eyes to glare at him and immediately snap them back shut. "Why does this keep happening to me?" I mumble, massaging my temples.

"Because you're dumb. And you keep pushing yourself too hard, like an idiot," Zoro says matter-of-factly. I smack him.

“You giving me the hangover treatment right now?” I murmur, trying to ignore the burnt taste of stomach acid in the back of my throat.

“You’d be surprised how many situations it’s useful in,” he responds.

“STOP THE FIGHTING!” Vivi suddenly screams. I flinch and press my palms over my ears when the volume makes the ringing in my ears louder.

“Ok, this is not the right environment for you right now,” Zoro mutters, putting himself in between me and the clock opening. I shove my head in his bloody chest. “Aw — dude *ouch,”* he hisses.

I groan again. “Shhhh. The healing power of your tiddies is gonna cure my concussion. Just let it happen,” I mumble, relishing in the temporary relief the pressure on my crown creates. Vivi yells something again, and just keeps going. I grab Zoro’s hands and clasp them over my ears. “I feel like I could appreciate the irony of this whole situation more if I didn’t feel so bad,” I grumble.

“At least you’re not spewing bullshit predictions and sweating like a hog this time,” comes Zoro’s muffled reply.

“Oh?” I say cheekily, lifting his hands just enough to hear. “Well I’m fine without the sweat, but how’s this; I bet Crocodile is gonna go flying over that plaza and then it’s gonna downpour. And that’ll be the end of this goddamn circus show.”

Zoro glares down at me. “That’s stupid. How do you keep getting stupider?”

“Yeah? Put your money where your mouth is, chia pet. 8,000 berri. On top of the 10,000 you’ll owe me when it turns out Crocodile really was the one keeping it from raining,” I say smugly.

On a technicality I think it was actually boats burning Dance Powder, but he doesn't need to know that.

"I refuse on principle to believe you," he states.

"Did anyone else just see Crocodile fly through the sky, covered in blood?" Usopp's voice rings out, somehow audible over all the yelling Vivi is doing.

I smirk up at Zoro as what little blood is left in his body flees his face. "You suck," he growls, shoving my head back into his chest.

"No you," I say muffled into his bloody pecs. "But you know what that means…"

We both grin at each other, and in tandem with the rest of the scattered Strawhats, shout "LUFFY WON!"

Vivi falls silent. "Even though it's over, even though Crocodile has been defeated…" she whispers, sinking to her knees, "why… why is blood still being shed?"

I shift my head so I can hook my chin over Zoro's shoulder. "Vives," I call gently. She turns to look at me, tears in her eyes. "Just give it a second. Stand tall and speak from the heart. Your voice will reach your people."

She bites her lip and nods, slowly rising back to her feet as the sounds of fighting subside. Outside the clocktower, a pitter patter can be heard.

"It's… raining," Usopp whispers, sticking one bandaged hand out into the shower. Zoro softly curses, the loser.

Vivi's back straightens. She takes a deep breath. "DON'T FIGHT ANYMORE!" she screams, back bowing under the force of her voice. "The rain will fall once again," she

continues. “The nightmare…” Fists clench. Stance squares. She lifts her head to the rain. “THE NIGHTMARE IS FINALLY OVER!” she proclaims to the sky.

Silence follows her proclamation. Until the roar of people in the plaza picks up.

“You can’t just erase everything that happened! This nightmare isn’t over yet!”

“We saw the royal army destroy Nanohana with our own eyes!”

“They even shot Koza!”

“We can’t forgive them for what they’ve done!”

A new voice rings from outside. “Royal soldiers! Throw down your weapons!”

“Chaka…” Vivi murmurs.

“You too rebels!” another voice, familiar, commands.

“Igaram?!” Vivi gasps.

“Called it,” I mumble, settling my forehead into the crook of Zoro’s neck.

“Yeah? Then why didn’t you make a bet?” Zoro asks.

“Would have been in poor taste,” I answer.

“When have you ever cared about poor taste?” he asks incredulously. “And not that I’m selling Luffy short in any way, but are Warlords supposed to be so…”

“Fucken easy to beat?” I finish for him. He shrugs, and I shrug back. “I don’t know what to tell you. The fucker didn’t even use Haki.”

Zoro gives me a weird look. “What the hell is Haki?”

I wave my hand. “Don’t even worry about it.”

Oh — wait a minute, *Haki.* ***Why the fuck haven’t I been trying to learn Haki?!***

Vivi suddenly spins around and races through the room and out the door.

“Ok, guess we’re going downstairs now,” I grumble, extracting myself from Zoro and only wobbling on my feet a little while making my way after her.

“Are you gonna trip and fall? Let me go first just in case,” Zoro demands, real concern in his voice as he jogs to be in front of me.

“Honestly, if I fall just let me die. That’s on me and I deserve that,” I mumble.

Usopp comes up on my side and threads my arm over his shoulder. “I don’t think you get that option,” he hums.

“Drat,” I grumble, accepting the help and descending from the tower.

———

I very pointedly ignore the two corpses in front of the clock tower when we leave. I'm pushing that breakdown back as far as I feasibly can.

We run, well Vivi runs while the other three of us stumble, our way through the battered and wet streets of Alubarna in the direction Usopp and Vivi saw Crocodile soar from. Usopp's still got an arm under mine, and I'm starting to get just a bit faint.

"Vives, I beg, slow down a little," I wheeze.

"Sorry, Ed," she apologizes, slowing her steps just a tad. Then her head whips to the side and she's off sprinting again. "You guys! Papa?!" she calls. We take off after her.

Our group of idiots is standing in the street with His Majesty King Cobra, who has Luffy draped over his back.

Sanji jolts back where he's face to face with the King. "P — papa?! You're Vivi's father?!" he shrieks.

"So that's the King, then," Zoro surmises.

Cobra chuckles, the movement jostling Luffy on his back. I jerk under Usopp's arm, then jolt forward to run up to them. Cobra has just barely lowered Luffy when I reach them, arms coming up to help guide him to the ground. "Thank you," I say earnestly, a quick glance up into the King's eyes before I'm looking down to scan over all the damage done to my Captain.

Cobra chuckles again. "No need for that, this young man saved me. I was prepared to die, if not for him," he says, a smile audible in his voice. I brush some of Luffy's sweaty hair from his face and trace a bruise with light fingers. "Even after being poisoned, and all the damage

he took during his fight with Crocodile, he still managed to pull two people from the rubble," Cobra continues. "His strength is extraordinary."

"That it is," I mumble, leaning down to rest my forehead over his.

"And the poison's out of his system?" Usopp questions.

"It's been neutralized," Cobra replies, "but he needs medical attention. You all do."

"Nevermind that. Vivi, go ahead," Zoro says, slumping down against a wall. At Vivi's questioning noise he elaborates. "Go back to the square."

"He's right. The rebellion is over, but nobody can celebrate until the King and Princess address the people," Usopp states.

"Right… And I'll tell everyone what you did!" she says determinedly.

"Don't bother," I scoff, a smile balanced carefully on my exhausted face.

"Yup, no can do. We're notorious pirates, remember? We can't get mixed up in politics," Sanji chuckles.

"Go ahead to the palace. We're pretty tired," Nami sighs.

Vivi gives us a nod, then her and her father are turning and making their way down the street.

Once they're out of earshot I address my crew. "All in favour of just collapsing on this street and making ourselves someone else's problem, say aye," I groan.

A unanimous “aye” rings from my pals, and then we’re dropping like flies.

“Someone wake me up in an hour to make sure my brain isn’t haemorrhaging,” I slur, then toss myself off the brink of unconsciousness.

_____

I’m woken up an indeterminate time later to something poking me. I groan and try to bat it away.

“None of that. C’mon, we need to make sure you’re not dying. Can you tell me your name? The date and time? Recite something?” someone, Chopper I think, asks.

“Wha’sit to ya? You a cop?” I mumble, shutting my eyes and trying to turn back over.

“I will throw you outside in the rain, don’t test me right now,” he snaps, voice quiet.

I grumble under my breath before cracking my eyes open and glancing at him. We’re in some kind of large room, I can see all the other Strawhats lying in beds around me. The room is dark, and I can hear the drum of rainfall outside the large windows.

I blink a couple times to clear my eyes, then stare right into Chopper’s soul. “E. D. Domino. I don’t know the date or time because I’m dumb, not because I’m dying. I could recite the FitnessGram PACER test if you want me to, but I think I’d rather just pass back out. That good with you?” I snark.

Chopper rolls his eyes. “You’re hopeless. But you’re responding cognitively, so you can go back to sleep. I’ll be back in a couple hours.”

I roll over and give him the finger. “Don’t bother. Just let me die in my sleep,” I grumble.

_____

“Wake up, concussion check. Name, date and time, recite something.”

“E. D. DOMINO, AND IT’S TIME I KICKED YOUR ASS—”

_____

Nami comes to fetch me the next morning. I’m already dressed and on my way out when she comes up, so she nearly crashes into me when I open up the door. She blinks in shock, then her expression flattens when she sees what I’m wearing. “None of that matches.”

I shrug. Ain't no fashion rulebook to tell me red basketball shorts and an open blue and yellow baseball shirt way too big for me is not allowed. Shit’s comfy. Adam Sandler core.

“Either way, I was just on my way to get you. Vivi and the King offered to show me the library, I thought you might wanna come,” she continues, turning back around and motioning for me to follow.

I hum. “Sounds perfect. I wanna learn as much about shit as I can before we leave.”

She tosses me a look over her shoulder. “Oh? I didn’t know you were an academic.”

I shrug again. “Not really. I just like learning, and the history of this place could be cool.” And probably important, with what I remember of the leaks I saw before I got sent here.

Eventually we make it to the doors of the library. They're large and covered in ornate carvings of jackals and falcons that I trace with my eyes as they swing open. Vivi comes jaunting out to grab Nami by the hand.

"Hi, Ed! Nami, I wanted to show you where our books on oceanology and navigation are," she says with a big smile, tugging Nami along. Nami's face goes bright red and she looks back at me desperately. I give her a thumbs up and a cheeky smile back. "My father is right over there, please make yourself comfortable. I'll be over in a moment," Vivi continues, pointing toward a small nook.

"Take your time," I snicker, following where she pointed and flopping into a plush armchair across from the King. "Yo. How's it hanging my guy?" I ask, pouring myself some tea.

He blinks at me. "It's, uh. Hanging good?"

I snort. "Great. Hey, can I ask about the jackals and the falcons? Y'all got that shit everywhere."

He straightens in his seat and his face lights up. "Oh. Yes, of course. You see the falcon and the jackal are considered guardian spirits of Alabasta, and have been since ancient times…"

I listen to Cobra with rapt attention. He goes over a brief history of Alabasta, the role of religion and guardians, and a whole slew of other things. By the time Vivi comes strolling over, me and Cobra are discussing in depth the protocols that come with passing down Chaka and Pell's Devil Fruits.

"You two get along like a house on fire, huh?" she chuckles, taking my now cold tea away and replacing it with fresh stuff.

I nod emphatically. "You didn't tell me your dad was so cool. I'm ordinarily not fond of monarchies, but you're pretty chill."

He tilts his head. "Why's that?"

I take a long sip of my new tea. “I generally find the concept outdated, classist, and not built well enough to offset corruption. You guys seem pretty good at being royalty, though.”

Cobra laughs. “I’ll take that as a compliment. It’s just about lunch time. If you’re interested, afterwards I could direct you to some great books that go more in depth about Alabasta’s history.”

I nod eagerly. “Yes, that sounds amazing! Oh, but first I’ve been meaning to ask, do you have a Transponder Snail handy in the palace? Preferably a white one, I don’t really want to broadcast my conversations to the world.”

Cobra nods. “Absolutely. We have a couple in the palace and one here in the library. I can have lunch brought to us in the meantime.”

I jump up from my chair with a woop as he motions for Vivi to show me where. The Transponder is tucked away in a little alcove with a big arching window with a view of the city. I thank Vivi before sitting down at the small desk it rests on. Vivi bids me goodbye and I’m left alone with the snail.

It’s actually one blue Transponder Snail (that I take the number for down) that’s hooked up to the white snail. The blue one seems entirely uninterested in me, but the white one blinks wide eyes at me and nuzzles into my hand when I pat it. Fuck that’s cute, who knew snails of all things would be cute?

I pull out my half of Ace’s vivre card and take a second to stare at it as it gently drifts along my palm. Then I’m pinching it between my fingers and ringing up the number. It rings for a long moment before there’s a click, and the blue snail's face is morphing.

“Hello?” Ace mumbles.

“Jesus, talk about a lacklustre greeting. I didn’t survive a civil war for this kinda treatment,” I complain, a big smile making its way across my face regardless.

The snail's face lights up. "Ed!" he cheers, "you're alive! Am I to assume that means Crocodile isn't?"

I snort. "Nah, fucker is still alive. Gonna spend a long while in Impel Down though." At least until Luffy breaks him out. Oh wait — nevermind. Ace isn't gonna get caught if I can help it, so he won't be going. "Yup. A long while."

"So you beat him," Ace confirms.

"Luffy punched him across the city and it started raining. He's still asleep," I confirm.

Ace bursts out laughing. "Well played! How many of your bets does that win? Yeesh, how much does your swordsman owe you now?"

"61,000 berri," I reply without a second's hesitation.

"...Why do you have that number memorized?" he asks slowly.

I shrug. "I like to keep my books balanced." Vivi comes around the corner again with a plate of finger sandwiches and my cup of tea I forgot. "Oh! Thank you! You wanna say hi to Ace?"

Vivi laughs. "Hi, Ace. When you're done, Ed, my father thought of some more books that may interest you."

I flash her a thumbs up and stick a finger sandwich in my mouth. "Oh my god these are amazing. Why the fuck are these so good?" I ask incredulously.

Vivi laughs, turning to leave. "You'll have to thank Terracotta! She's Igaram's wife, and the palace housekeeper."

“So you and the princess made up?” Ace asks after Vivi has cleared out.

I shrug. “We brawled our feelings out. Punched a princess, punched a guy pretending to be a princess, overall good week for me.”

Me and Ace continue to chat while I eat my lunch. Then he says, “oh, I can see my destination in the distance. I gotta go, we’ll talk later,” and hangs up before I can get another word in.

“Flaky bitch,” I murmur affectionately, stacking my empty plate and cup together to take them back to where Vivi and her father are. I take the pile of lettuce I hadn’t eaten and place it down for the snails. “Thanks, you’re gems.” The blue snail ignores me. The white snail blinks big eyes at me and munches on the leaf. “Oh you’re cute. That’s not fair,” I mutter, turning tail and running from the alcove with my dishes.

I’ll have to remember to tell the rest of the crew about the snails, so they can call home while we have time.

When I get back to the royals, my dishes are plucked from my hands and a new cup of tea is shoved into them by a short woman who scurries away from me before I can process it. I blink. “Thank you!” I call after her. Huh.

Cobra chuckles. I plop back down into the seat I took earlier. “Are you interested in taking a look at those books now?” he asks.

“Yes, but before that I had a question I wanted to ask.” His eyebrows raise at my statement and he motions for me to continue. “The Reverie. Tell me about it,” I request.

He tilts his head as Vivi leans forward. “The Reverie, huh? Yes, I can tell you about it. It’s a meeting for fifty of the rulers united under the banner of the World Government. It happens every four years, the next one is in two,” he explains.

I nod along. “Weird ask but has anyone ever… snuck in?”

Unexpectedly, Cobra’s face breaks into a smile. “Actually, don’t tell anyone this but… Once Titi, Vivi’s late mother, helped a girl and her father sneak in,” he laughs at me and Vivi’s wide eyed looks. “She was quite the rebel! Yes, it was a little redhead girl named Ariel, Titi just couldn't resist her charms.”

I choke on a sip of my tea. “I’m sorry, a redhead named *Ariel?”*

He raises an eyebrow. “You know her?”

I blink a couple times. “She’s a famous mermaid where I’m from. And also not real. Wonder what that’s about…” Eh. Probably unrelated.

“Interesting. Anyways, I took the liberty of moving aside a few books you may find interesting, as well as a few of my favourites you can feel free to take with you,” Cobra continues.

I blink at him. “You’re letting me take your books?”

He chuckles. “Yes, I’ve already read all of them, it’s no trouble. Your navigator has already choses quite a few books to take with her as well.”

Yeah that sounds like Nami.

———

After absolutely speeding through the history books Cobra recommended and learning more about Alabasta’s dynasties than I’ll ever realistically need, I go in search of more tea. By the

time I get back, there's a new stack of books sitting on the table I'd claimed as my own.

I blink at the stack and thumb through the titles. A book about Alabasta politics I set aside because politely no thank you, a history of Alabastan law, one about Alabastan art history I keep in mind to look closer at, a book about the rules of diplomacy of all things, and—

I pause on one book's spine. 'Lost Archeological Sites and Their Significance; A Complete Guide.' It could just be a coincidence, but… I take a glance around my part of the library. I don't see anything, but I smile regardless.

I sit my ass down and start reading.

When I finish that stack I go and switch them out for stuff I'm more personally interested in, then go to get more tea once again. By the time I return, the entire stack has been rearranged and replaced with world history books and archaeological texts.

I level a flat look at the ceiling, but sit my ass down to read those too.

_____

I don't steal the white Transponder Snail. *I don't.* He just so happens to find himself amongst my belongings at some point.

_____

The next day I'm woken up by something cold pressing against my cheek. I jerk away from it and squint my eyes open to glower at the source.

Zoro is crouched beside my bed with a small glass of clear liquid. I shoot him a scathing glare and snap, "what?"

He shoves the glass at me. “Drink this,” he says eagerly.

I squint at him. “What? No,” I say incredulously. He shoves it forward again. I roll my eyes and sit up. “What the hell is it?”

“Stop asking questions and throw it back,” he demands, a giddy smile on his face that makes me nervous.

I groan. “Fuck it. Bottoms up.” And I chug it. The first thing I notice is that it tastes like peach. Then the warmth registers. It’s pleasantly hot down my throat and I stare wide eyed at Zoro’s big goofy smile. “What did I just put in my body,” I ask slowly.

“Peach schnapps,” he says matter-of-factly.

My jaw drops. “That was alcohol?” He nods. “You gave me alcohol at,” I look at the clock, “6 in the morning?” He nods again. “You made me *enjoy* alcohol at 6 in the morning.” His smile widens.

“Told you! I told you I’d find something you like!” he cheers, hopping to his feet and jumping around like a kid on Christmas.

“Where the hell did you find this?” I ask, slowly rising from the bed and looking around for my clothes.

“There’s this liquor store in town, the lady who was working there said it was an Alabasta exclusive. They have some kinda special brewing technique,” he explains.

I pause in pulling on my boots. “Alabasta exclusive?” I repeat.

He gives me a weird look. “Yeah that’s what I said. Why?”

I grab my hat off the end of my bed and stick it on. “Because that changes our morning plans. Originally we were just gonna get a couple bottles, now we’re getting a lifetime supply.”

Zoro giggles like a schoolgirl and races out of the room, whooping and hollering.

“Shut the hell up, we’re still trying to sleep!” Usopp groans, rolling over in his bed.

“Sorry, love! Bye bye!” I call, running after Zoro and slamming the door behind me.

_____

I lose Zoro in the palace. By the time I’ve made it to the front stairs, he’s nowhere to be seen. “That man is so directionally challenged it’s like goddamn *magic,”* I grumble under my breath.

I resign myself to just waiting at the bottom of the tall steps for his bitchass to show up. The morning is warm, though not as monstrously hot as the days here so far have been. I’ve got my sunglasses (which miraculously didn’t break during my entire fight) shoved on my face to block out the light from my still mildly sensitive eyes.

“Detective Domino!” a voice calls from down the way.

I turn, fully prepared to book it back into the palace away from whoever it is if I don’t wanna see them. To my surprise, it’s the blue haired Marine from the casino. I blink as he finishes running up to me. He takes a second, hands on his knees and panting for breath, before he wipes sweat from his forehead and straightens up.

I blink at him again. “Hey dude.”

His face goes pink. “Er — Uh, hi. U — um sorry, I just w — wanted to… uh…” he stutters.

I stare at him as he keeps shifting his eyes and stuttering.

What is happening?

“Hey dude, don’t worry about it,” I say awkwardly. I think about the way Robin looked at him, and I suddenly want to be as far away from him as possible. Even with that point aside…

He’s faking how out of breath he is, and I know a real stutter when I hear it.

I flash him a smile and his face turns scarlet. “I, uh, gotta get to shopping. I’ll see you around, yeah?” Then I scurry off into the city. I feel his eyes burn into my back, and turn off into a street the first chance I get.

What the shit. What was that?

That’s no regular Marine. What the actual fuck did he want from me? What was with that whole show?

I’m so caught up in my thoughts I plough right into someone going around a corner. “Oh, I’m so sorry—” Oh wait, it's Zoro. “Nevermind. Bring me to my alcohol,” I demand, latching onto his arm.

He gives me a weird look. “Yeah… Are you ok?”

I glance behind myself then tug on his arm. “I’m fine. Just had a weird conversation. Let’s go, please.”

He shoots me another look, then starts walking down the street he came from.

I barely make it ten steps before the revelation that's been bubbling in my head for the past few hours bursts to the surface. "I killed a person and I can't make myself feel bad about it," I blurt, nails digging into the meat of his bicep.

He doesn't stop walking, but he looks down at me even when I can't meet his eyes. "You protected the people you care about, and somebody who intended to hurt them paid the price. In my opinion, there's nothing to feel bad about there," he states.

I frown at my feet for a moment. "...Hm. Alright, I'll keep that in mind. It's now your responsibility to make sure I don't become a serial killer with that advice."

He snorts. "Yeah, I think I can handle that. No offence, but you're not the serial killer type." I snicker and pat his arm.

We walk for a while, and I stop paying attention to our path to focus on the people we pass. After we pass the same balding man for the eighth time I give Zoro a look. "Either that man is following us, or we're going in circles. And given that you're *you,* I'm willing to bet on the latter."

He comes to a halt. "Shut up. No we're not," he says quickly, taking a look around. "Oh. It's right there."

I turn to the little hole-in-the-wall shop he's pointing to and tug him towards it. A bell jingles over the door as we enter, and a short ginger girl behind the counter looks up as we come in. "A little early for day drinking, don't you think?" she says, amused.

"Never too early for booze," Zoro disagrees.

I trot up to the counter. “Hi here! This idiot tells me he got some peach schnapps from here, that true?”

She gives me a smile. “True it is. You interested in more?”

I grin and nod. “Damn right. Say, do you have a purchase cap here?”

She gives me an apprehensive look. “That depends..?”

“We’re sailors. I wanna stock up on as much of that stuff as I possibly can while we’re here,” I explain.

Her mouth opens in an “ah” as her eyes light up in understanding. “Oh of course. Yeah no cap, go buckwild. The peach schnapps will run you 800 berri a bottle, though.”

I grin. “Perfect. Fifty then.”

She blinks. Zoro blinks. She bursts out laughing. “Wow, you *meant* stock up. Got it.” She gives me a once over, then one for Zoro as well. “How’s this, 40,000 berri for the lot of them, and I’ll throw in another five bottles.”

I pluck out my wallet and slam the cash down. *“Wonderful,”* I say with a grin. Then I take a look over of some of the other selections. “You got something else I could get for 800 berri?”

She takes a quick glance over the bottles, and plucks a bottle of something clear with a blue label and adds it to the counter. “This, though I guarantee it’s not as smooth as the schnapps.”

I wave my hand and drop down the coins. “Don’t worry about that, It’s for this jackass. He wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

Zoro blinks at me. “You’re buying me booze?”

I shrug. “Consider it payment for helping me carry these back. Besides, you still owe me 61,000 berri. I like to do nice things for the poor.”

The girl behind the bar snorts into her hand while Zoro’s face drops.

_____

That night I find Nami out on a remote balcony of the palace with her face to the stars. I drape a blanket over her shoulders and settle down next to her with a bottle of my schnapps nestled in my arms.

“Almost pretty enough to make you want to stay,” she says wistfully, not taking her eyes off the sky for a second.

I bump my shoulder into hers and take a swig from my bottle. Jesus Christ, this shit is good. Oh I’m gonna be an alcoholic, I can feel it. “You sure it’s the stars making you wanna say that?” I ask.

She sucks in a breath and lets it go.

“It’s only natural to want to stay close with the people we love,” I say quietly.

She tenses up beside me before her head’s dropping on my shoulder. “Is it always gonna be this hard? Having to leave people behind like this?” she asks me, a whine to her voice.

I lean my head on hers. “I dunno. Never felt it. Not the way you’re feeling it,” I hesitate for a moment, “but leaving people always hurts. It’s hard learning to cope with someone's absence,

whether you're the one leaving or not. But you girls are strong. And you know what they say," I wink at her, "distance makes the heart grow fonder."

She chuckles into the blanket, then snatches my schnapps to take a long sip. "Maybe you're lucky," she says after a long moment, "that you'll never fall in love like this."

"I'd like to think I'm free of the burden," I say mildly. "But people like us… Oh, we weren't meant to settle. We're meant to sail." My lips curl into a smile and I trace the outline of the monkey and prince in the sky. "To take freedom in our hands and taste it."

"You've never thought of settling down? Finding someone, not that you're romantically inclined to, but someone you love and just making a home together?" she asks, passing back the bottle.

I shrug and give her a suggestive smile. "I've thought of it. Finding someone who's good at fucking and good at taking care of me. But eh. I think I like playing pirate more than I'd ever like that."

She laughs clear as a bell into the night. We can faintly hear the sounds of celebrations still taking place down in the town.

There's a long moment of silence between us.

"I want her to be happy," Nami whispers, a secret between her and the stars.

I hold her hand. "Then so be it."

_____

On the third day, Luffy wakes up.

Chapter End Notes

There's so much shit packed in here I'm gonna be amazed if you guys find all the hints scattered in it.

So many questions. SO MANY QUESTIONS! Haki? Where's Ace going?? The Reverie??? The mystery books???? Ed's alcoholic arc????? What the fuck is up with that Marine guy?????? Can Ed just not recognize flirting??????? What's gonna happen with Nami and Vivi???????? Will I actually answer any of these questions????????? Who knows!

Chapter 42: Chapter Forty Two: Are We Still Friends?

Chapter Summary

ARE WE STILL FRIENDS? - Tyler, The Creator

There's something truly dangerous about being seated next to Luffy during meal time, which is summed up by the multiple sets of teeth marks all over my arm. "You mistake me for a sausage or something stupid like that one more fucking time, I'll eat *you,"* I threaten, a knife levelled at my Captain.

Chapter Notes

I once again got way too carried away and wrote over 5k. Um. Oopise.

Just as a head up, the first chunk of this chapter is heavy on recent manga spoilers. Like 1080's spoilers. I have that OP spoilers tag for a reason.

The bus system in my area is fucking vile. If I ever find the motherfucker who designed it it's ON SIGHT. WHY AM I SPENDING ONE TO TWO HOURS ON TRANSIT EVERY DAY.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I start my morning by spending more time with Vivi's father in the Library. We've moved on from Alabastan history to more general world history, and I've set aside quite a few books about islands I know we're gonna visit that I plan to take with me.

"Pardon me, I don't know if this is rude to ask," Cobra suddenly starts. I look up from my book about Sea King migration habits to motion him to continue. "Is Ed short for something?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah. That's not rude at all. My name's E. D. Domino, I just go by Ed with my friends."

He blinks a couple times. "Your name is… E. *D.* Domino?"

I furrow my eyebrow and nod. “Is… that a problem?” I don’t remember this dude having any issue with Luffy being a D, but — er… I can’t remember super well, but didn’t he say some shit about D’s in the leaks I saw..?

He shakes his head. “No, no. I’m just surprised to see two of you on the same crew. It’s quite the coincidence.”

I smirk and snort. “Yeah, quite.”

Hm. As far as I know, Cobra goes to his meeting with the Five Elder Stars to ask them about his ancestor and the Will of D, then fucking dies. I don’t actually know shit about it, so if he asks me I won’t be able to help him.

“That’s something we have in common,” he chuckles while I take a sip of my tea.

“Ah, ok. That’s cool.” Sabo gets blamed for the whole mess, right? So maybe I can get him out of harm's way if I give Cobra something — The thought catches up to me and I spit my tea out to the side as my jaw drops. *“YOU’RE FUCKING **WHAT?!”***

He starts laughing heartily at my reaction. Oh my *god* , that adds a whole new layer to this shit that I cannot even *begin to think about.*

“Gimme a second, isn’t your family like, one of the founding members of the World Government?! How the shit are you guys D’s as well!?” I shriek.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” he snickers.

I slam my hands over my face. “Ok, awesome. Great. Cool. *Why the fuck are you telling me this?”*

He shrugs. “I don’t know. You’ve just got something… It’s like the world has already decided you’ll be privy to all its secrets. Who am I to deny the world?”

I blink a couple times. “That’s cryptic as *fuck* my guy.” Dear lord, this is too much at once. “I’m gonna go have a mental breakdown in the corner of the library. Something to marinate on though; do not tell the higher ups about that, and *don’t ask them questions about it.”* His expression sobers at my tone but I continue regardless. “If you’re ever in a situation where you’re alone with high level government officials, watch your mouth. Don’t tell them you’re a D. Don’t push buttons, you will fucking *die.* And think of the position that would put Vivi in.”

I like this guy. I don’t want him dead.

His face breaks back out into a smile and he chuckles. “Very well. I’ll keep such things in mind. My apologies for springing this on you, you clearly have… a few things to reevaluate.”

That’s an understatement. I pick up my forgotten book and tea and stumble away from him with a lazy wave. I plop down on a bench in a far tucked away corner of the library. Then I shove my head in my hands and muffle a scream.

———

After a short (long. It’s long.) breakdown, I acquire a metal file from someone around the palace and tuck myself back into the corner of the library. I’ve got ten slightly mangled seastone pins to use, and I want at least one seastone bullet before I leave this kingdom.

The actual metal work with forging and whatnot for seastone is a craft particular to Wano, and my ass isn’t about to wait until then to get ahold of some. The heads of the pins are already semi circular and roughly the appropriate size, so it’s only a matter of sanding it down to the same shape as the lead balls I fire.

It takes the better part of the day, and I’ve definitely ruined both the file and the bench I was occupying, but I get it down to what would roughly constitute a bullet. Not super sure how the… let's call them *craftsmanship flaws* , will affect how it shoots, but c’est la vie.

After that I go about collecting the last of the books I want to take with us. A book on Alabastan cooking for Sanji, that archaeology book for Robin, a medical text for Chopper, a book about Alabastan legends for Usopp, plus a couple things for myself.

Since Nami has already picked out her books, I steal a doorknob right off what I think is a storage closet for her. It's solid gold and shiny, so I figure she'll like it. Considering I already bought Zoro booze and I don't think Luffy can read, I don't bother picking anything out for them.

Then it's back to our room to wait on Luffy's awakening. I push open the door with my back and try not to drop all my shit. "Hey guys, sorry I've been gone all day. Do any of you know —" I'm cut off by someone launching themselves into me, and us both tumbling to the ground with a yelp. All of my books (and the door handle) go flying into the air as I'm assaulted by an armful of Luffy. I smack him on the head. "You dumbass, don't tackle me when I'm holding shit—" Then it registers that I'm holding *Luffy,* and that Luffy is *awake.* I shriek, then I'm hugging him tight and peppering kisses all over his giggling face. "You son of a bitch! When the fuck did you wake up?!"

He wraps his arms around me several times and aggressively rubs his cheek into mine. "Just now!" he chirps. "I'm super hungry, Nami said it's been three days and that means I've missed fifteen meals—"

Luffy keeps talking while I stand up with him wrapped around me like a koala. I carry him over and deposit him back on the bed while he prattles on about food and weird dreams about the goddamn meat man of all things.

I rub an affectionate hand through his hair and he leans into it with a wide grin. "I never thought peace and quiet would make me miss your mile a minute mouth," I tease.

The door suddenly slams back open as Terracotta and a huge basket of fruit roll in. "Eh — It's Igaram! He's alive!" Luffy shouts, pointing at Terracotta.

I use my hand in his hair to shove his head down. "Yes, he is, but that's not him. Hi Terracotta! Thank you for lunch, it was very good!"

Terracotta laughs loudly as the fruit cart thing is rolled over to the bed. “Oh, no need for thanks dear! I heard you had something of a rough day, so I hope you worked up an appetite! Please, have some fruit to tide you over until dinner!”

I shoot my arms out and shove as much fruit as I can into my mouth before Luffy inhales the entire fucking thing. Never thought this would be something I could give an honest opinion on, but whole apples going down your throat feels just a little too weird for me.

“Was that fucking magic?!” Zoro and Sanji screech in unison.

“Yes. Did I not tell you guys we’re wizards?” I deadpan.

“Hey lady! I’m gonna have three days worth of food, okay?” Luffy demands.

Terracotta flexes her arm and smiles. “Splendid! I’ve been at this for thirty years, no young man's appetite will intimidate me!” she announces.

“Oh, you say that now…” I mutter.

_____

Dinner is not a stately affair. It’s a battle and a mad dash to eat as much food as we can before Luffy devours it all. The boy is now sporting several fork shaped holes in his hands, not all from me but a majority are, and one of those little plastic swords they use to keep sandwiches together that somehow manages to stay embedded in his hand despite the stretching.

There’s something truly dangerous about being seated next to Luffy during meal time, which is summed up by the multiple sets of teeth marks all over my arm. “You mistake me for a sausage or something stupid like that one more fucking time, I’ll eat *you,”* I threaten, a knife levelled at my Captain.

“S’ry!” he yells, muffled through mouthfuls of what may at have one point been a whole chicken.

“This fucken guy…” I mutter, then proceed to inhale a whole plate of kofta. It’s fucking *delicious.*

“Ed! I was eating that!” Nami shouts, punching the back of my head into the table.

“Hey! Some compassion please, I’m recovering from a concussion! Punch me anywhere else!” I complain, shoving a falafel into her mouth in retribution, then stabbing Luffy in the hand again when he gets remotely close to the dish of pork rinds I snatch from across the table.

Eventually even the guards are laughing at our spectacle, and dinner ends with Usopp and Chopper dancing on the tabletop and Luffy blown up the size of a balloon. It’s fun and party-like in a way the dinners waiting for Luffy to wake just haven’t.

_____

“Ed! You gotta come have a bath with me!” Luffy demands when he sees me going to accompany the girls to the women's side of the bath.

I give him a look. “Yeah, no. I don’t know if you knew this but despite my big dick energy, I’ve still got a great pair of tits. One look at these national treasures and it’ll be an actual blood bath. I’d rather not kill anyone tonight, so I’ll stick with the girls,” I respond dryly. I throw Vivi and Nami a look over my shoulder. “But if you guys are uncomfortable with that I don’t mind waiting until you’re done.”

Nami raises an eyebrow. “Why would that make us uncomfortable? I’ve already seen you naked several times.”

“You try getting chased out of a girl’s change room when you’re twelve, see how it changes you as a person,” I grumble. “Either way, I don’t trust all you shits to behave, so I’m steering clear of the men's bath.”

Luffy turns on the puppy dog eyes but I’m having none of it. I march up to Sanji and tug him down to my level by the ear. “Look me in my fucking eyes right now. I catch even an inkling that you’re planning to peek at our bath, it’s curtains for you. I’ll drown you so fast Satan will give you a medal when you get to hell.”

He blinks twice before his entire face explodes it red and smoke streams out of his ears. “Peek… at your… bath…” I tug harder on his ear and he yelps. “Yes! No of course not, I would never!”

I slap him on the cheek. “I’m so glad we’ve come to an agreement, and I don’t have to explain to you how degrading and disgusting that behaviour is. Not just for you, for us,” I say with a bright smile.

“You tell him, Ed!” Nami cheers, tugging Vivi into the bathroom. I flip the boys a single finger salute before following them.

After I give myself a quick wash with soap, I all but toss myself into the bath. “Ed! Be careful, I’m not giving you CPR if you hit your head and drown!” Nami shouts from where she’s sat with Vivi washing her back.

I stick my tongue out at her and dunk my head underwater. When I surface, both Vivi and Nami have slipped into the water as well.

There’s some kind of crash from the other side of the tall dividing wall and someone, Sanji I think, yells something about defending honour. Not my goddamn problem. I float around on my back as the girls chat, staring up at the ceiling and thinking.

Skypiea is up next, which means Eneru. I’m gonna have to watch my ex-Christian ass mouth while we’re up there, lest I get struck down as I was always meant to. It also means our first encounter with Blackbeard, which could be a fucking disaster if I fuck it up.

I honestly wouldn't mind screwing with the plot up there, since there's less of a chance something going weird up top would affect things down here. If I do it well, I could save a bunch of lives and maybe get us tons more funds while we're at it.

Maybe I could have us meet up with the Shandorians early on and skip that whole battle royale thing, or even the bullshit trials. Hm, but I'd still have to make it look like a coincidence…

Fucken shit man, why didn't anyone tell me knowing the future would be this goddamn complicated? I kinda suck ass at planning.

"—d. ED!" Nami shouts. I startle and splash back underwater. I surface and slick my hair back, blinking wide eyes at Nami. She levels a completely exasperated look at me. "Yeesh, I called you like ten times! Pay a little more attention!"

I give her an apologetic laugh. "Sorry, what was the question?"

She rolls her eyes. "I was asking what you thought about us having to leave tonight. With the Marines closing in and all."

I sigh and wade over to the girls. "Yeah, if we don't go tonight, we might never be able to. I'd rather not be caught if it's an option."

Nami nods. "So we're in agreement."

———

"Tonight?" Usopp confirms.

“Yup,” Nami nods.

“So we’re leaving?” Chopper asks.

“It’s a good idea. The Marines know we’re here, and there’s no reason to stick around,” Zoro agrees.

“True. Who knows what they’re up to,” Sanji mutters, turning to blow his cigarette smoke out the window. Vivi is silent from her seat.

“You think we should leave, Luffy?” Usopp asks.

Luffy taps his chin. “Yeah… After one more meal!”

I shove his head down with a sigh. “No time for that. Has everyone gotten everything they need? No loose ends we left untethered, right?” There’s some contemplative hums from around the group. A sudden ringing from beside my bed distracts us. “Ah. Right, I’ve been expecting a call.” I murmur, shuffling through my things to find the white Transponder Snail. I should probably name this one…

“Did… you take that from the library?” Vivi askes slowly.

I freeze halfway to picking up the transponder. “Uh. No. Hello, you’ve reached the Strawhat Pirates, Ed speaking. How may I direct your call?” I answer sweetly.

“Hello old friends! Bet you never thought you’d hear from me!” Bon Clay sings.

“Oh hey! What’s up dude, how’s your head?” I ask.

“I’m just fine, as if you could ever hurt me!” he boasts, the snail making a funny face.

“I beat him though…” I mumble sadly as Luffy snatches the transponder from my hands.

“Swan guy! What do you want?” he demands.

“Ahahah! It’s not about what I want, it’s about what I have! Your ship!!” Bon announces with a cackle.

“YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING!” everyone around me yells at once.

“Isn’t this the jackass who hurt Ed?!” Sanji screeches.

“Bon, knock it off before they break my goddamn Transponder. What’s up?” I say, pushing the boys away from my poor snail.

“I’m on your ship right now. It’s up the Sandora River, you can come and get it! Ahahah!” Bon explains with a goofy look. Then he hangs up with a click.

“Can we trust that guy?” Sanji asks doubtfully.

“We *were* friends when we first met,” Luffy hedges.

“I trust him with my life,” I say matter-of-factly.

There’s a few odd looks and a few shrugs. “Good enough for me!” Luffy announces.

“Not like we have a choice, he’s got the ship. And if he screws us over, we’ll kick his ass,” Sanji states, stubbing his cigarette on the windowsill and walking forward to his things. I tuck my snail back into my pack and haul it up onto the bed. When the fuck did this get so heavy? Maybe I shouldn’t have taken so many books…

“Um…” Vivi pipes up. “You guys… I don’t know what to do,” she says softly.

We all pause in gathering our things.

“Listen carefully Vivi, you have twelve hours to make a decision. We’ll get our ship and make a stop at the east port at exactly twelve noon tomorrow. We can’t drop anchor, but if you decide you want to come, that’s your only chance. We’ll gladly welcome you as a pirate if you do,” Nami offers with a smile tinged sad by an answer she already knows.

Usopp tosses a rope out the open window, slings his backpack on, and shoves Sanji to go in front of him. The crew makes beckons and complaints to Vivi as they all shuffle out.

I’m second last, and I offer Vivi nothing but a kiss pressed to her brow and simple words. “I’m glad we met. Live well.” She gives me a kind but sad smile in return. We both already know her answer. “We’ll meet again someday,” I promise.

I slide out the window and wind the rope around one of my forearms and began sliding down. I catch a glance of Nami presenting Vivi with a kiss of her own before they disappear over the edge as I descend.

———

We ride the Supersonic Duck Squadron down to our ship. The night's cold is biting even through cloaks, and I rub my hands with the reins clenched between my teeth to keep my blood circulating.

“This is nice,” Zoro sighs, leaning back on his own duck and enjoying the breeze. Psychopath.

“Guess this is goodbye to sand country. Looks like I’ve led us to another flawless victory,” Usopp boasts. “Geez, how much longer are you gonna be eating, Luffy?”

“Alabastan food is the best. Can you make food like this Sanji?” Luffy responds, sticking another chunk of meat in his mouth.

“Yeah, Terracotta shared a few recipes and spices with me before we left,” Sanji says, trying futilely to light a cigarette in the rushing air.

“Oh, that reminds me. I got you a cookbook of Alabastan recipes,” I pipe up, patting my bag where it’s hitched to the duck I’m riding.

He turns back to blink a couple times at me. “Really?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Yeah? Don’t sound so surprised, I’m super nice like that. Got a book for Chopper and one for Usopp too.”

“Oh yeah? What kinda book?” Usopp inquires.

“Legends and shit. I also stole a solid gold door handle for Nami. How you holding up Nami?” I throw out, looking back at where she’s slightly lagging behind.

“Are you hungry Nami? You can have a bite of my meat. But just one,” Luffy says when Nami doesn't answer.

“Is it about Vivi? I get it, but there’s no point brooding,” Sanji says, a concerned frown on his face as he lightly chews on his unlit cigarette.

“I’ll let it go… for Vivi’s sake…” Nami’s voice drifts to us on the wind, “the one billion berries Igaram promised me.”

Me and Usopp exchange a look. *A misdirection, a lie.*

Still, we all react the same. “You better!” we all shout. We hit a bump of some kind and suddenly Usopp is no longer in the saddle of the duck beside me.

“Uh — guys, Usopp fell off.”

“That’s terrible Nami!”

“What’s the big deal? Vivi’s gonna be fine, she’s a princess.”

“USOPP FELL!”

“He’ll be fine.”

“No thanks to you!”

———

“So you’ve come! I’ve been waiting for you! Did you miss me?!” Bon Clay shouts from the top of the crowsnest.

“Not a bit!” Zoro shouts back.

“Ok, let’s unload. Thanks, ducks,” Sanji says, unhitching his bag.

“This is where we part ways,” Usopp says.

“Take care of yourselves,” Zoro adds.

“Say bye to the King, the funny tube haired guy, and everybody else for us!” Luffy cheers as they all began running back to the palace.

“Farewell! Let all you ugly ducklings turn into beautiful swans!” Bon Clay sobs from his perch. Then he blinks and jumps down to the deck. “Wait a minute!” he screams, stomping one of his feet.

“What?” Sanji grumbles, grabbing Nami’s bag for her.

“Is that any way to greet a friend?!” Bon screeches.

“Sorry doll, you’re a real gem! Thanks so much for getting the ship!” I sing, trotting up the ship and planting a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, thank you, it was no trouble, really!” Bon sings, patting my head.

“What does that mean?” Zoro groans, coming up the ladder/stair thing after me.

“It means the Marines may have gotten the ship if he hadn’t moved it,” Nami explains, following us up.

“May have? No! They most certainly *would* have! Do you have any idea how tight the Marine security around this island has gotten?! Not even a swan could get off!” Bon Clay

shrieks.

Luffy scrambles up the gangplank next, blinking at Bon. “So you saved the Merry from the Marines?!”

“Why?!” Usopp and Chopper cry in unison.

Bon Clay gives us all a tearful thumbs up. “Because we’re friends! No joke!”

“Oh hey, my money. Nice. That Dugong was truly an honourable mammal,” I mutter.

I barely set down my bag beside it before Luffy is yanking me by the back of my collar into some kinda cancan line dance bullshit. “You really *are* our friend! No joke!” he hollers.

“So the Marine blockade is keeping you from getting off the island and you need allies, is that right?” Zoro surmises.

Bon drops out of the line to dramatically fall to his knees. “It’s true! Especially in trying times like these, we must band together under the flag of friendship!” he wails.

“YEAH!!” Chopper, Usopp and Luffy all scream.

“To friendship!” comes a chorus of yells from Bon Clay’s ship, which was moored behind us and I guess we just didn’t notice until now.

“Where did you jokers come from?!” Zoro squawks.

I slap my hand onto my face as we start moving.

_____

There's something novel about being stuck in an eight ship blockade while they hurl gigantic black iron spears into your ship. Not a good kind of novel, but novel nonetheless.

"SHOOT CANNONBALLS! AT LEAST I COULD DEFLECT THOSE!" Luffy screams as we're hit with another barrage of those spears.

"We take on any more of those things to the hull and the only place we're going is the bottom of the sea!" Sanji shouts.

"More incoming!" Nami announces.

I hit the deck as Luffy, Sanji, Zoro and Bon Clay all defect the spears from one side, but the impacts from the other sides send the ship rocking. "This sucks!" I scream. "Damn you, Black Cage Hina!"

Bon Clay whips his head back to me. " *She's* here?! We gotta run!" he screams.

"Who?" Luffy asks.

"Scary lady!" I reply.

"You're doomed! Stupid pirates!" an irritatingly and vaguely familiar voice shouts from one of the enemy ships.

"Hypnotist guy?! Aren't you a pirate?!" Luffy shouts across the water.

“Shut up! I have my reasons!” Jango hollers back.

“Where do I know that other guy..?” Sanji mutters.

There’s a loud bang from the other side of the deck, and then the two ships Jango and Fullbody are on are sinking in an explosion of wood. We all turn to where Usopp is stood at the still smoking cannon with his jaw on the floor.

“Good job Usopp! A+ shooting!” I cheer.

“There’s a gap to the south now! Let’s get the hell out of here! Change course!” Bon Clay screeches.

“We can’t,” Luffy says, eyes cast straight in the direction we’re sailing. “If you wanna go, go. But we can’t leave yet.”

“What?! WHY?!” Bon Clay screams.

“Noon at the east harbour. We’ve got an appointment we can’t miss. There’s no time to go around,” Nami states.

“That’s suicide! What’s so important that you’d risk your lives like this?!” Bon screeches.

“We have to go get a friend!” Luffy says with a wide smile as Bon’s jaw drops.

He turns to the sea and his back straightens. “Ah. Seeing as that's the case… I can’t run away now!” he announces.

“Mr. Bon Clay?!” one of his subordinates calls.

I feel my spine snap straight. *I don't have to let him get caught!* "Bon—" I start.

He turns to me and I cut myself off. There's a resolute glint in his eyes, and I know instantly there's nothing I can do to change his mind. No matter how much I want to.

"These people are risking themselves for a friend! How can we ever live with ourselves if we abandon them now?!" he shouts. He turns back to the rest of the group with tears running down his face. "Now listen carefully to what I have to say."

His plan is explained half through tears and half through interpretive dance, but we get the gist. I throw my hat like a frisbee onto the head of the very buff gentleman now dressed as me. "You will do gloriously," I tell him solemnly. He nods his head with conviction. I salute Bon Clay as he jumps back onto his ship. "It's been my honour to fight with and alongside you. May we meet again, my friend," I tell him, extending my arm across the gap.

He reaches his hand across the gap of the ships and takes mine. "No, friend. The honour has been mine."

Every part of my body is telling me not to let go, but I know I can't make that choice for him.

I let go.

And then the ship is sailing away. We all duck inside the ship as the Marine vessels change course to block Bon Clay's ship.

"Three minutes! Full speed ahead!" Nami shouts, staring down at her pocket watch. Then we're speeding east unimpeded. We watch as spear after spear is shot into Bon Clay's ship, even as they take out Marine ships with them. The mass of ships is obscured by black smoke and I clench my fists.

“What an incredible person,” I murmur.

“WE’LL NEVER FORGET YOU GUYS!” Luffy screams across the water.

_____

We fight our way through more Marine ships still. They fall into the ocean under the power of our crazy ass monster trio, and I empty three full rounds of my gun before we make it to the east port, twelve noon sharp.

“I’ve been on an adventure,” Vivi’s voice rings from the shore, broadcasted loud enough from the city that it echoes even out here. “It was a journey of hope across an ocean of despair. I left Alabasta and set sail across the vast, dark ocean. I saw unbelievable islands, amazing creatures, and landscapes right out of a dream.”

“Oh, it's Vivi's speech,” Nami murmurs beside me.

Vivi’s voice is wistful, and tinged with the telltale crackle of an amplification system. “At times the sound of the ocean was… soothing. Other times it was harsh… mocking me and my fears. But in the darkness of that storm, I encountered a single, small, ship. That ship pushed me forward and said, ‘Do you see that light?’”

I settle my hand on Nami’s shoulder as Viv’s voice continues. “That strange little ship never lost its way, even in the dark. It would dance on the giant waves. It didn't resist the tug of the tides, but sailed ahead through the toughest of headwinds. And pointing forward, it said… ‘Look, there’s the light.’ Aboard that little ship I learned a new kind of love, a patience I never knew I lacked, and more about what binds people than I could ever hope to put into words. I…” she hesitates a long moment before continuing. “I hope you hear me. Because I heard you.”

I bite my lip to keep myself from crying. Jesus Chirst, this girl really knows how to hit you in the pussy of your feelings. “Oh Vives…” I mumble.

“In time, historians will say it’s just a legend. But for me, that was the truth. And…” Vivi’s voice trails off.

“Vivi…” Chopper mumbles, hanging onto the rail so he can look at the shore.

“That’s Vivi’s voice, without a doubt,” Zoro states.

“They must be broadcasting the speech happening in Alubarna. She’s already made up her mind not to come,” Sanji says.

“No way! She’s here, I know it!” Luffy mutters, fingers clenched tight on the rail.

“Let's go, it’s past noon already,” Sanji says quietly.

“Vivi’s coming! Let’s drop anchor and look for her! She’s definitely here!” Luffy whines, face twisted with a bit of desperation. He turns those wide eyes on me. “Right, Ed?” I remain silent.

“Bad news! The Marines are catching back up!” Usopp shouts from the upper deck.

“Just how many ships are there?!” Zoro groans.

Sanji lights up his cigarette and blows the smoke. “Give it up Luffy. Her path is different from ours.”

I place my free hand on Luffy’s shoulder. I can’t meet his eyes with the look he’s giving me.

“YOU GUYS!” Vivi’s voice shouts from the shore, different from the broadcasted voice of the loudspeakers, this is undoubtedly right from the source.

Luffy jolts forward under my hand. “Vivi! It’s Vivi and Karoo!” Indeed, on the rocky shores Vivi stands dressed in white and gold finery, a long pink shawl draped across her shoulders and dress with Karoo at her side. They’re both waving their arms at us. “I told you she’d come!”

I tighten my hold on Luffy and Nami’s shoulders as everyone around me starts cheering.

“I’ve come… to say goodbye,” she cries. Then her voice comes through on the broadcast system again as she picks up a handset. “I can’t go with you! Thank you for everything!”

“What… did she say?” Luffy questions quietly.

“I’d like to continue my adventures, but when it comes down to it… I love my country! So I can’t go!” she shouts.

Luffy’s shoulder relaxes under my hand and a smile blooms across his face. “I see!”

“I…” tears are very clear in Vivi’s voice, “I’m going to stay here! But if we ever meet again… WILL YOU STILL CALL ME FRIEND?!” she wails.

My hand slams up from Luffy’s shoulder to his mouth. “Careful. If the Marines connect her to us, she’ll be in huge trouble,” I murmur.

“We can’t give them any proof that we’re friends. Best to just leave quietly,” Nami agrees, turning around the same as the rest of us.

My fingers, entirely without my direction, come up and tug the worn bandage from my arm as I stick my X straight up in the air. I don’t turn my head away from the horizon, but I know for a fact all my crewmates and Vivi and Karoo have theirs raised as well.

I don’t budge as cannon fire and iron spikes crash into the water around us and water spray rains down. I don’t move a single inch until my Captain’s voice rings through my bones.

“SET SAIL!”

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap on Alabasta! Vivi's speech always hits bro. Shit's good.

I DO THINGS FOR REASONS I DO TIHNGS FOR REASONS I DO THINGS FOR REASONS—

My heart's full to bursting I just love this show sm and I love writing this fic I'm having an emotional break.

Skypiea is so fun I'm like knee deep writing it rn and just AH. It's such a good arc why tf do people not like it?

Art

Chapter 43: Chapter Forty Three: I Would Not Ask You Where You Came From

Chapter Summary

Like Real People Do - Hozier

“Cactus hearted as well as cactus headed,” I grumble, still staring out at the ocean.

Chapter Notes

Fucking with the timeline is a hobby of mine. If the anime is allowed to do it so am I. Should the St. Briss have fallen on them immediately after leaving Alabasta? Yes. Do I care? Fuck no. We're here for vibes not for continuity.

I wanted to have the filler episode where Usopp sets off the 200 shell firework in here because it's so cute, but man I gotta keep the plot moving T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mood on the ship after we escape the last of the Marine ships is somber. I’m slouched against the rail watching the water pass as we get further and further from our friend and her country.

“Can you guys please cheer the fuck up?” Zoro groans behind me.

“We miss Vivi!” everyone else wails.

“If you couldn’t stand to leave her, you should have just kidnapped her!” Zoro snaps.

“What?! Barbarian!” Chopper shouts.

“You’re mean,” Nami mutters.

“Mosshead,” Sanji grunts.

“Three sword style,” Luffy spits.

“That’s not an insult,” Usopp murmurs.

“Four sword style,” Luffy spits.

“That’s not better!” Usopp yells.

“Cactus hearted as well as cactus headed,” I grumble, still staring out at the ocean.

“Fine! Keep moping then,” Zoro squawks.

“Well, it’s about time. I thought you’d never leave that oversized sandbox,” comes a smooth voice from the aft.

“Tell me about it…” Zoro grunts. Then he chokes. I lazily turn around while everyone else starts screaming. Zoro’s got his sword popped out of the scabbard in the blink of an eye. “Here to avenge your fellow comrades, eh? Bring it on,” he growls.

Robin is standing relaxing in the doorway, clothes I recognize as Nami’s on and that familiar mild look firmly in place.

“What are *you* doing here?!” Nami shrieks, fumbling with her Clima-Tact

“What a babe!” Sanji swoons.

“ENEMY RAID! ENEMY RAID!” Usopp hollers into a megaphone he got from god knows where.

Chopper screams again and dives behind cover (badly). “Who is she?!” he screeches.

“Huh?! Oh. It’s you! You’re still alive?” Luffy asks.

“You done hiding then?” I muse, a small smirk quirking my mouth.

Robin’s extra limbs effortlessly smack everyone’s weapons away as she strolls across the deck like she owns the place. She pauses in her steps at my words, before continuing to the cupboard under the stairs and pulling out a lawn chair.

“Ed — You knew she was here?!” Zoro squawks.

I shrug. “She hasn’t exactly been subtle. I brought you that archeology book, by the way. If you want to give it another read.”

Robin eyes my coy smile with something like trepidation as she sits back on the chair. “Yes, I saw it. I’ve been reading it below decks, actually,” she says in her mild manor.

“Sorry, did my book selection bore you?” I ask teasingly.

“Yes,” she deadpans. “I also took a shower and borrowed these clothes. They’re your lady navigators, right?” she drawls. Nami’s screeching is drowned out by her continuing. “Monkey D. Luffy… You haven't forgotten what you did to me, have you?”

“What did you do to this beautiful lady?!” Sanji screams, shaking Luffy back and forth.

“Hah? I didn’t do anything to you!” Luffy grumbles.

Robin crosses her arms behind her head and leans back, that familiar mild smile pasted on her face. “I suffered a great deal because of you. Now take responsibility.”

I snicker as my friends keep panicking and Sanji keeps shaking Luffy. “We ask that at this time all mystery chicks vacate the ship or we’ll be forced to call the Marines. Thank you for voyaging on the Going Merry.” Usopp announces through his megaphone.

Luffy slaps Sanji’s hands away from him. “What do you even want?” he demands.

Robin’s eyes crinkle at the corners as she balances her elbow on crossed knees and leans on her palm. “I want… to join your crew.”

There’s a short moment of silence, then the screaming returns tenfold. I throw my head back and laugh.

“You made me live when I wanted to die. That’s your crime. I have nowhere to go, and nowhere to return to. So let me join your crew,” Robin explains.

“I see. Guess it can’t be helped. Welcome,” Luffy says with a shrug.

“LUFFY!” everyone else yells.

Luffy snickers and throws a wide grin over his shoulder at everyone else. “Don’t worry! She’s not a bad person!”

Chopper and Luffy are won over by Robin's extra limbs doing silly things. Nami is won over with money. Sanji was sold the second he saw her. Usopp gets won over by the pure stupidity Robin's Devil Fruit is capable of.

Zoro is not having it. "I don't trust it for a second," he mutters, crossing his arms and leaning onto the rail beside me. I watch the proceedings with an amused smile.

"And what say you, First Mate?" Robin's voice calls across the deck. The boys pause in their tomfoolery to blink back at me with wide eyes.

I hum. "First Mate says… Zoro can be the voice of reason. I wanna talk with the smart pretty lady." Ah how I've missed Zoro's indignant squawking. Music to my goddamned ears. "Also we really need adult supervision."

Even if it's mentally unstable as hell and just on the wrong side of suicidal.

_____

That night is just short of tense.

Dinner is delicious as always, Sanji takes one of the recipes from the book I gave him for a spin and by god the results are amazing, then we retreat to the deck for a card game.

After the eighth person in a row is demolished by me in Speed (Nami called bullshit about what I said in the cage, she called wrong), Zoro forcibly calls impromptu game night quits. Not even the sweet allure of a game of Spoons is enough to change his defeat riddled mind.

Robin spends the whole meal silent, and the whole card game in a corner observing. Everyone tries their best not to acknowledge or let her presence change anything, but it's obvious no one knows quite what to make of her.

Usopp starts packing up the cards, and Luffy latches into my arm like a leech. “Do you need to be shown where the bathroom and stuff are?” I can hear Nami ask Robin lamely behind me before Luffy is dragging me down through the hold into the ladies room.

He all but tosses me onto the bed before throwing himself on top of me. I shove my head under his chin while his hands work their way under my loose shirt to rest on my back. “What’s got you in such a rush?” I mumble.

“Didn’t want Robin to take the bed,” he responds, tangling his legs up with mine while I tug the new comforter Nami bought in Alubarna over the two of us.

“There a reason for that?” I ask, slightly amused.

He hums. “It’s harder to sleep with you in hammocks because you keep falling out.” I smack him on the back while he snickers.

Nami and Robin shuffle in sometime later. Luffy is already snoring away like a buzzsaw at that point, but I find myself not quite asleep yet. “This was Ed’s hammock, they don’t use it. Feel free,” Nami says flippantly, climbing up into her own.

Robin raises an eyebrow at our arrangement. “Apologies. I wasn’t aware the First Mate and Captain were an item.”

“We’re not.”

“They’re not.”

Me and Nami reply in unison.

Robin's eyebrow raises higher. “…Right.”

“You’ll get used to it,” I mumble, shutting my eyes and waiting for rest to find me.

_____

For the first time since my fever dreams during Kestia, I’m ripped from sleep by the violent crush of concrete and metal.

I choke on a breath, frantically shoving Luffy’s limbs off myself and scrambling onto the floor. There’s not enough fucking air in this tiny goddamn cabin and what little there is is heavy and impossible to *breathe*—

I drag myself up the ladder and out the hatch, bumping into a crate of whatever the fuck before throwing myself through the door onto the deck. My barely healed knees scrape on the wood and I dig my nails into the grain.

I barely feel the imprint of the wood on my forehead, I barely even remember lowering it to the deck. Breathing is somehow getting harder even though the air is fresh and biting cold at my nose. I’m trying to drag myself over to the rails but my vision is fuzzy and warped.

My throat gets tighter and tighter and it’s like my own body is trying to choke me out, my hands slam into the bars of Merry’s rail and I pull myself upwards. The one two punch of my throat closing like a vice and my stomach being pressed in as I lean over the rail is the last straw.

I hurl over the side of the ship.

It isn’t pleasant, nor would I recommend, but it does shock my system enough to snap me out of panic mode. I blink down at the dark water for a second before sucking in a long breath. It tastes like shit but it works.

I take a second and let my shoulders relax. I'm perfectly fine, there's no random goddamn cars in the middle of the ocean to get me. Out here it's just me, the water, the chilly night air, and the hand that sprouts from the rail to tap my shoulder.

I scream and curse at an appropriate volume.

"My apologies Detective Domino, it wasn't my intention to frighten you," Robin's voice calls from the door to the storage hold.

I whip around to see her, and I don't know what my face looks like (though it must be a horrific mess) but it makes Robin blink twice before her slight shock is locked behind that detestable mild look.

"Sorry, trauma is my only souvenir from home," I joke hoarsely. I take a long deep breath and gather myself. The panic still rattles through my hands in aftershocks that will probably last the rest of the night and through the morning, but I can feel the cool calm of the night settling over my shoulders like a shawl.

Robin stands silent in the doorway for a second before she takes a few long strides to stand at the railing a few feet down from me. The hand from before brandishes a folded up handkerchief that I gingerly take to wipe at the corners of my mouth.

"What does that mean?" she suddenly blurts.

I tilt my head to regard her, and she almost looks shocked and embarrassed at herself for asking. My expression remains blank as I look back out to sea. "I wonder if this conversation will be a staple for the rest of my life," I murmur. I can feel Robin's gaze get heavier. I don't bother looking her way. "I imagine I don't have to explain what not having a home to return to feels like to you of all people." Her sharp inhale is the only indicator that she heard me. I trace my finger up the painted wood of Merry's railing. "Robin, may I ask you something?" I start. She waits a moment before humming. "Why was *Alabasta's* poneglyph your last hope?"

She lets my question hang in the air for a long moment. Then she chuckles. Low and under her breath, wrought not from genuine amusement but from some kind of nihilistic hopeless

‘what else can you do’ place. “Detective Domino,” she drawls, “I am simply running on empty.”

I nibble on the healing part of my cheek and hum. “Ah. I see.” I lightly slap the railing and give her a bright smile that only kind of feels forced. “Well not to gas you up, but I’m sure we’re going to see loads cooler shit than that up ahead.”

She gives me a slow singular blink before a smile that doesn't even remotely reach her eyes paints her lips. “Is that so? Why do you suppose I’m aboard *your* ship, joining *your* crew, Detective Domino? To find this supposed ‘cool shit’?”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “I think you’re here because you’re desperate,” I say bluntly. Robin bristles. “You don’t sneak onto a ship of weirdos who you see as enemies unless you’re out of fucking options.”

Robin is quiet for a beat. “I suppose your Captain told you about what happened in the tomb, then?” she says finally.

I scoff. “As if. My Captain is physically incapable of giving a shit about the past. If I wanted that information from him I’d have to pry it out with a crowbar made of meat. Something you’re gonna learn about me fast is that I just *know shit.* My suggestion? Just roll with it.”

Robin gives me a long hard stare. “...Hm. Goodnight then, Detective,” she says, tone clipped and just a little unnerved. I consider it a win. With that, she spins on her heel and strides back across the deck and disappears into the aft.

Finally back to some semblance of privacy, I let my shoulders sag and brow furrow.

I am going to have to be way more fucking careful with her. At least until I know she isn’t a threat. I have to remember this isn’t the Strawhat Robin I’m familiar with, this is a woman who will do what it takes to survive.

I also need to get these fucking nightmares under control. This is fucking ridiculous.

My thoughts are interrupted by shuffling from behind me. I glance over my shoulder and meet the sleepy eyes of Luffy. He's wrapped up in the comforter, the ends dragging across the deck as he trots up to me.

"I've come to collect you," he announces. "You ready to come back to bed now?" He saddles up right next to me, bumping the top of his head into mine.

I take a deep breath, suddenly fucking exhausted as my head drops down to rest on his shoulder and my eyes droop. "Yeah," I murmur.

"You want me to carry you?" he offers.

"Yeah," I mumble, throwing my arms over his shoulders as he winds his arms under me. "You wanna tell me about more constellations?" I request, burying my face in the junction of his neck and grabbing the comforter in loose fists.

I feel Luffy's chuckle through my bones as my entire body starts to involuntarily relax in his arms. "Yeah sure! Ace told me there's a meat guy up there but he only comes out when you're really good…"

———

I'm re-reading the archeology book I got for Robin when it happens. I've only just gotten to a section about this supposed upside down island — something about a Devil Fruit, I don't know — that disappeared. I'm sure it would be much more interested if not for—

"Is it raining?" Usopp mumbles.

Something small drops onto my head. I pluck it out of my hair with a puzzled look to stare at it. A chunk of sun bleached splintered wood rests in my palm. I feel my heart skip a beat and my eyes widen.

I drop the book forgotten on the floor and jump to my feet. “Everyone grab onto something!” I shout, hooking an arm around the person closest to me and wrapping the other around the mast.

Everyone turns to me with confused looks. Nami furrows her brow and grabs onto my arm where I’m holding her. “What? Ed what are you—”

I don’t really have to answer. Not when a giant, battle torn upside down galleon falling from the sky right beside our ship answers for me.

Choked noises make their way out of all my companions. Then the screaming starts. The ship nearly capsizes from the waves the galleon is making, Usopp rolls across the deck while hysterically crying and slams into me and Nami.

Nami stays rooted in place, but I go flying. I roll ass over teakettle across the deck until I slam into the rail, nearly falling right into the water because of how we're tilting. My hair gets an impromptu soak and I’m holding the rail for dear life.

“SOMEONE PROTECT THE SHIP, SOMEONE GET US AWAY FROM HERE, AND SOMEONE *FUCKING SAVE ME!”* I screech, blinking salt water out of my eyes.

The ship abruptly tilts the other direction as the wave rolls under us, and I find myself tumbling back across the deck, smacking into Zoro’s legs and sending him sprawling on top of me with another scream, and both of us laying flat as pancakes on the ground to avoid moving further.

“What the fuck is happening!?” Nami screams.

“It’s a dream! A bad dream!” Usopp sobs.

“Brace yourselves! Here comes more!” Sanji shouts, right before another wave rocks our boat.

Me and Zoro both go sliding across the deck, hands scrambling to grab anything to stop our descent toward the open edge of the deck. We only manage to grab onto each other though, because we’re idiots.

A pair of arms sprout from the deck to root us in place barley a meter from open water. I toss my head back to see where Robin is and find her with arms hooked into the upper deck railing and sweat trailing off her face as she stares at the pair of us bewildered.

I can’t help it, even in the midst of the chaos, I crack a smile.

A barrel rolls across the deck and smacks Chopper in the face. Luffy punches a chunk of debris that almost smashed into the deck and nearly falls overboard. Nami just screams. Usopp sits down and prays.

“It’s fiiiiiine. Totally fine. Just close your eyes. Then open them slowly. *It’s a beautiful peaceful morning—”* It’s decidedly not a beautiful peaceful morning when he opens his eyes and a skull bounces into his lap. His scream is so loud and high pitched I think I hear the wine glasses stashed securely in the galley shatter.

I catch the skull as he throws it over our way and frown over at him. “Hey! Don’t throw dead people, it’s rude!” I holler.

The only response I get is “OH MY GOD THERE’S MORE!?” as another skeleton crashes into the deck.

Eventually the waves calm to the point Robin lets her extra limbs dissipate in a puff of flower petals. I roll to my feet and squeeze sea water out of my hair.

“Alright, why did a ship just fall out of the sky?” Luffy asks, staring straight up.

“Captain error?” Sanji muses.

“The sky’s clear, there’s nothing up there,” Zoro grumbles, getting to his feet and dusting himself off.

Nami suddenly screams off to the side. We all whip around to her. “What’s wrong?” Sanji yelps.

“The Log Pose is fucking broken!” she shrieks. “It’s pointing up and it’s not moving!”

“It’s not broken,” Robin says, blinking as she lets go of her vice on the railings. “The magnetic field of another island has made it switch its course. And if it’s pointing skyward… That can only mean one thing.” Her head tilts upwards and her brow furrows. “Our Log Pose has been captured by a sky island!”

Nami blinks. “Oh, of course. A sky island,” she rips a chunk of wood out of her hair and hurls it into the sea. “SKY ISLAND?! Are you fucking kidding me?!”

“Is that really a thing?” Zoro asks doubtfully, tossing me a look.

I cross my arms and nod my head. “Yup, sky islands. Not just islands either, there’s whole goddamn seas up there. If I had to hazard a guess, that ship managed to get up there and fell through a break in the sea, or got shunted off the edge.”

Both Usopp and Luffy’s jaws drop as sparkles erupt in their eyes. “WHOOOOOA!” they both scream.

“A whole sea and island in the sky?! Let's go! Raise the prow!” Luffy hollers, pumping his fists.

“Raise the prow! Raise the prow!” Usopp cheers.

“Captain, we can’t raise the prow,” Sanji deadpans. Usopp starts crying and a pair of arms grow out of Luffy’s arms to smother his yelling.

“I don’t know very much about them, it seems the Detective knows more than I do,” Robin says.

I smile and shrug. “The sky’s the limit, but not a hard one. I’m willing to negotiate.” Robin stifles a snicker.

“But that’s *impossible!* Islands and oceans can’t just *float!* The Log Pose has to be broken!” Nami whines, shaking her wrist to try and get the needle to budge.

“Never doubt the Log Pose,” me and Robin say in unison. She shoots me a look and I give her a sheepish smile.

“No matter what happens to the ship or the crisis you face, the Log Pose is never in question. If you need to doubt anything, doubt your senses,” Robin extrapolates.

“Remember what Crocus said when we first entered the Grand Line? Common sense is worthless here. That doohickey on your wrist is the most reliable piece of equipment in this bitch,” I continue.

Nami violently shakes her wrist one last time, then throws her head back and sounds a groan of pure despair.

_____

Robin disappears below decks and resurfaces five minutes later with a large case in her hand, a couple pots of something, along with a couple books. “Pardon me, swordsman, Detective, would you please help me move this coffin and all the skeletons' pieces?” she asks sweetly.

Nami and Chopper both duck behind the mast while me and Zoro drag the goddamn coffin that managed to somehow fall right on our deck and not get tossed off in the ruckus. I stick my hand through dry rotten clothing and pluck a piece of shiny gold jewelry out to toss to Nami. Not even that lures her out from her hiding place, though it is immediately tucked away in her clothing.

“Are you gonna put it back together? Can I help? I’m really good at puzzles,” I ask, crouching beside Robin as she opens up the case and pulls the partially shattered skull from the coffin.

Robin pulls a brush from the case and pops one of the pots open, glue I can see now, and shrugs. “Sure, I don’t see why not.” I whoop and carefully pluck a few shards of skull from the coffin.

It takes us no more than five minutes to fully reconstruct the skull, during which both Luffy and Usopp wander off to go check out the wreck. “Why is this not weirding you out?” Nami hisses from behind the mast.

I shrug, picking the reconstructed skull up and holding it beside my face. “I dunno. I think skeletons are neat. Hey Nami, what’s a skeleton's favourite food?”

She grimaces but Chopper leans further out beside her. “What is it?” he asks genuinely.

“Ribs,” I say, voice deeper than usual while I move the skull's jaw like it’s talking.

Chopper and Sanji burst out laughing. Nami smacks her forehead into the mast with a loud groan. Robin snickers and Zoro is looking at me like I just killed his whole family.

“What’s with the holes?” Sanji asks.

I hum. “Maybe he got a lobotomy?”

Chopper shakes his head. “No, to make a hole like that during a lobotomy would mean the patient had died during the procedure. More likely, they used to drill holes in the skull to relieve pressure on tumors a long time ago. It’s not a common practice anymore.”

Robin takes the skull from my hands and I let her. “This man died over two hundred years ago, he was in his mid thirties and died of sickness on the high seas. His teeth are very well preserved in comparison to the others, probably due to the tar on them.”

She flicks through a couple pages of the book she brought up and taps one. “His clothes are particular to a specific area of the South Blue. The ship is an old exploration vessel, the St. Briss from the Kingdom of Briss, and set to sail two hundred and eight years ago.”

The page she pointed out has a picture of the St. Briss, whole, and from long before it fell on us. “That’s it alright,” Nami admits. “Same symbol and everything. And you figured this all out from a bunch of bones?”

“They say dead men tell no tales, but that isn’t necessarily true. Given that this was an exploration ship, there’s likely to be records aboard,” Robin says.

“Yeah, except the damn thing is sinking with our idiots on it,” I say dryly, pointing to where Usopp is screaming and Luffy is gargling and flailing in the water.

“What are you idiots doing?!” Nami screams, shaking her fist at them over the rail. I leave it to Zoro to fish them up.

“I did it! I found the most amazing thing!” Luffy yells, back on the ship and still dripping water. Then he holds up the map.

The landscape of Skypiea stares beautiful and proud at us from the paper.

Chapter End Notes

Zoro, up in the crows nest on watch, watching Ed have a panic attack and the most cryptic conversation ever with Robin: ?

NEW SAGA NEW SAGA NEW SAGA!

I don't think I'm every going to recover from the emotional stress and strain of school yeehaw.

Chapter 44: Chapter Forty Four: People Would Learn to Rejoice And To Fear Our Coming

Chapter Summary

> *Bremen - PigPen Theatre Co.*
>
> I jaunt up to the megaphones. “Hello divers, this is your tour director speaking! I ask that you please keep all important limbs inside your suit at all times, and remember to always tip your operator! Now, I’d like to go over some rules before we begin,” I call down them cheerfully.

Chapter Notes

> Dude why the hell are art classes kicking my ass so hard?? Who designed my program and why do they hate me in particular???
>
> In other news, I've officially written over 200K of this fic and that's horrifying to think about. Like... we aren't even halfway to the timeskip yet. This thing is gonna be a BEAST.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “Skypiea… So there really is an island in the sky?!” Nami groans, looking over the map.
>
> “We’re going to a dream island! We’re going to a dream island!” Luffy, Chopper and Usopp cheer.
>
> “Will you guys calm down? We don’t know if this is legit. There’s lots of fake maps in the world,” Nami grumbles. The faces the boys make are nothing short of devastated. “Er — Sorry. I’m sure it’s real,” she apologizes awkwardly. “There’s only one issue…” she continues. Then she smashes her fist into the mainmast and whirls on them. “WE DON’T KNOW HOW TO GET THERE!” she hollers.
>
> “You’re the navigator! Figure it out!” Luffy yells back.

“Uh — guys, please take it easy on the Merry,” Usopp mumbles.

“There’s some things even I can’t do!” Nami continues, ignoring Usopp.

“It’s easy! Just sail into the sky!” Luffy demands.

Nami lets out a wordless screechy grumble thing before checking her Log Pose again. When it still shows the same result she throws her head back and groans. “Ok, this isn’t going anywhere. Ed, do you have any idea how we can get up to this goddamn sky island?”

I tap my chin. “Hm, sky islands are notoriously hard to get to. Who knows the way up to this one in particular?” I deflect. I don’t wanna spoil all the fun of this by just *telling them.* That’s fucking borning.

“Well this ship got up there, there may be some information on board,” Robin offers.

“You mean the one that sank?” Usopp snarks.

“Then we’ll just have to salvage it!” Nami announces while Usopp and Luffy shout their agreement.

“That’s impossible!” Zoro squawks.

“And a bad idea,” I chime in. “This stretch of ocean is the territory of a salvager, if he catches us trying to ‘steal his loot’ we’ll be in trouble.”

Nami strokes her chin in false thought. “Hm, yes that would be a problem. If I cared, that is! Let’s salvage that ship!” she hollers while the boys cheer.

I shake my head. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you…” I elbow Zoro. “8,000 berri he’s gonna show up as soon as you guys go under.”

Zoro shrugs. “Lots of ocean out here. Unlikely.”

Sucker.

“What’s salvage mean?” Chopper asks.

“Raising a sunken ship. But that won’t work in this case — the ship is too big,” Robin responds.

Usopp flicks his hair over his shoulder with a smirk. “I have a better idea…”

———

“Hahah… Wow… You really like to put us in danger, huh?” Luffy laughs nervously from inside two barrels, one with a window and arm-glove-things.

“I promise to find a way to the sky for you, Nami!” Sanji cheers, wiggling his glove-arm-things around.

Zoro doesn’t say a single word from inside his.

“I’m counting on you!” Nami says sweetly.

“No need to worry, my engineering is flawless,” Usopp boasts.

“No kidding, this is fucking impressive,” I say appreciatively, poking at the tubes, pulleys and pump.

“Alright! Go get ‘em boys!” Nami laughs, pushing Zoro off the deck. His squawk echoes loudly through the tube and out the megaphone things they’re attached to.

“Wait! Don’t go without me!” Luffy yelps, jumping in after him. Sanji just saultes and falls backwards into the water.

I jaunt up to the megaphones. “Hello divers, this is your tour director speaking! I ask that you please keep all important limbs inside your suit at all times, and remember to always tip your operator! Now, I’d like to go over some rules before we begin,” I call down them cheerfully.

“Ed you goddamn weirdo, just spit it out,” Zoro’s voice snaps.

“Shut up you damn mosshead, please continue Ed!” Sanji’s voice sings up.

I roll my eyes. “You people. Anyways, please be on the lookout for anything shiny, anything interesting, or anything pertaining to the sky island. If you just so happen to run into anyone down there, be nice. You guys can be good at making friends when you want to. And be careful with those suits, I’m willing to bet they aren’t battle grade.”

“Hey, I did the best I could with what we have,” Usopp grumbles.

“Yeah, and like I said, it’s fucking impressive. Doesn't mean they can keep up with those monsters,” I respond.

Chopper switches to his big form and takes hold of the break as the boys continue down, even when a gigantic Sea King emerges beside us to snatch another huge weird bird thing that passes far above our ship out of the air. We just gracefully ignore it.

“This is Chopper, please report in,” he calls down the tubes.

“This is Luffy. There’s a lot of sea monsters down here. Over,” Luffy calls up cheerfully.

“Is this the den of a snake Sea King?!” Zoro shrieks up his tube.

“This is Sanji. It’s fucking *looking at us,”* he hisses out of his.

“They’re ok,” Nami says resolutely.

“Ok?!” Usopp wheezes.

“They’ll be fine, stop being such a worry wart! And Chopper, hold tight to that break!” Nami orders.

“At least I’m not down there too…” Usopp mutters, wiping sweat from his face.

Then the chanting starts. The chanting, cheering, whistle blows, and clangling that is.

“...What the fuck is that?” Usopp asks slowly, squinting across the sea.

I flick open my spyglass and point it in the direction of the noise. “That,” I say, snapping it back shut as the chanting gets louder, “would be the Scavenger King Masira. You know, the *reason we shouldn't be trying to salvage here.”*

Nami hangs her head. “I’m sorry for doubting you,” she says miserably.

“Company, halt!” a voice booms from the huge ship as it slows to a stop beside our comparably tiny caravel. The big banana protrusions and monkey with cymbals figurehead grin down at us.

“Aye aye, sir!” a cacophony of voices respond.

“Is this where that ship sank?” the first voice calls again.

“Aye aye, sir!” the crowd repeats.

“Then prepare to raise ship! That sunken ship belongs to me! Okeekee!” Masira hollers, stepping up onto the rail with his arms raised.

“Great, a group of unstable men led by an unstable monkey,” Nami grumbles, as if we aren’t exactly that.

I jab her none so gently in the ribs and jerk my head at Usopp in a silent ‘follow my lead’ motion. “Oh thank god! You’re the Scavenger King Masira, right? We’re so lucky you’re here!” I wail, waving my arms with a huge relieved smile slapped on my face.

“What the shit are you doing?” Nami hisses out the side of her mouth. I ignore her.

“That huge ship fell out of the sky and nearly killed us! We need an expert scavenger!” I cry, a hand dramatically poised over my forehead.

“What?! You’ve heard of me?! You need my *help?!”* Masira shouts, leaning over the rail with wide eyes.

I nod frantically. “Oh it’s terrible! We had to send down a team of divers, but I don’t know if they’re going to be enough!”

He furrows his bushy monkey-like brow. “A team of divers? Are you trying to steal our shipwreck?!” he yells.

“No sir!” Usopp yelps. “W — We’re uuuh… NAMI’S BROOCH!” he suddenly screams.

We all turn to him and stare.

He blinks. “Y — Yeah! Nami’s brooch fell overboard! It’s a family heirloom, worth practically nothing monetarily, but priceless in sentimental value! You see, it’s the only connection she has to her sick father back home!” Usopp cries, shaking Nami back and forth by the shoulders.

“Yeah! It — uh — fell overboard when the ship dropped on us! So we sent our boys to go get it, but they’re stupid, and not experienced salvagers like you are! So please help us!” I wail. “Just look at how distraught poor Nami is!”

Nami looks more bewildered than distraught, so I surreptitiously stomp my foot into her toe. She lets out a strangled screech and her face twists up into a grimace. “Yeah, totally distraught. About my *sick dad,”* she grits out.

Masira and his crew stare in silence for a long moment. “YOU POOR PEOPLE!” he suddenly wails. “WE’LL HELP YOU! I’LL GET YOU YOUR BROOCH!”

We all blink. I hold my hand up and Usopp high fives me.

“Hey guys, status update?” I call down the tubes as Masira turns back to start hollering at his crew.

“There’s a squid on my face,” Zoro’s flat voice responds.

“We’re not finding much that isn’t junk,” Sanji groans.

“I found a shiny thing!” Luffy cheers.

“ANY SIGN OF THE BROOCH?” I ask very loudly. Masira briefly glances back at me before turning back to directing his crew.

“What? Brooch?” Sanji asks.

“YEAH! NAMI’S BROOCH. THE REASON YOU’RE DOWN THERE. HER SICK DAD’S BROOCH,” I yell into the megaphones.

“The hell are you yelling for?!” Zoro snaps. There’s a short pause. “That scavenger guy showed up, didn’t he.”

I cackle down the mic. “Yessir! Shame you haven’t found any berri. Now to the point, Masira is going to raise the ship. So there’s gonna be some guys down there and some spikey clamp things. So in short, hold onto your asses.”

On that cue, all three of the boys' screams echo up from the mics. Masira whips around to stare at us. “Are your divers ok?” he yells over.

“They’re fine! Do you want us to haul them up before you raise the ship, or just fish ‘em out after?” I holler back.

“Just let them enjoy the ride, okeekee!” he laughs. Then the monkey figure head drops from the ship. More commotion and moving shit happens about the other ship, and I turn away to look at the water with a frown.

I feel like I'm forgetting something…

"Anyone else seeing that huge ominous shadow beneath the waves?" Usopp's shaking voice says from my right. We all turn at the same time.

"Hey, uh, Masira? We have a problem!" I call over, not taking my eyes off the shape.

"Hah? Everything alright?" he calls back.

"Er — There's a giant sea turtle trying to eat your shipwreck," I say slowly. Both of our ships suddenly tug downward. "Aw, *fuck,"* I whine.

"What is that?! A CONTINENT?!" Nami shrieks, hiding behind me as the sea turtle surfaces. It absolutely dwarfs us, and the scale is quite honestly fucking with my head.

"I don't know! I don't know! I can't see anything! It's all a dream! A weird crazy dream we're all having together somehow!" Usopp cries, hands clasped firmly over his eyes.

"A dream?!" Chopper exclaims.

We all relax as a group. "Phew. Thank goodness."

"Ah. It seems they've been devoured, ship and all," Robin states.

"DON'T SAY THAT!" Usopp screams.

"Yes, the hoses are hanging from its mouth. They've been eaten," Robin confirms.

“STOOOOP!”

Chopper pops back down to his hybrid form and latches onto my leg. “Sanji Zoro and Luffy got gobbled up!” he screeches into my pants.

“This is all your fault! You sent them to the bottom of the Grand Line!” Usopp yells, pointing an accusing finger at Nami. “You didn’t know what was down there, but you sent them anyway!”

Nami barely has the decency to look apologetic. “You’re right. I’m sorry!” she announces, not looking very sorry at all.

“I mean, it could be worse?” I say awkwardly.

“COULD IT?!” Usopp screams, dropping to the ground and curling into fetal position.

The ship suddenly jerks again. “It seems we’re getting dragged under,” Robin observes.

“NOOOOOOOOOOO!” we all wail.

“Robin! You’re strong, right?! Do something!” Usopp sobs.

Robin shakes her head. “That’s impossible. That thing is too big.”

“Uh, do you want us to do anything about the turtle thing?” Masira hollers over hesitantly.

“Give it a minute!” I yell back, falling into the rail as we tilt towards the water.

“It’s times like these we need to band together as a crew!” Usopp suddenly announces.

“Yeah! Usopp, cut the hoses and save the ship!” Nami orders.

Usopp’s head slams into the rail beside me. “What about our friends?!”

“SHE’S EVIL!” Chopper screeches.

The world suddenly goes dark. I blink, for a second thinking I’ve spontaneously gone half blind. “Oh. That’s fucken ominous,” I mutter. Night has fallen over our ships. “Uh, I hate to say it, but cut the tubes,” I suggest.

Usopp turns to me completely flabbergasted. “What?! You’d just abandon them like that?! What the hell is going on?!”

“It’s way too early to be dark…” Nami trails off, looking back and forth between the sky and her pocket watch.

The opposite crew is making very panicked yells, saying something or other that I don’t pay attention to. I lean over the rail to stare into the suddenly very hard to see water. Zoro’s stupid green head pokes up and makes eye contact with me.

I wordlessly hold out my arms, and he somehow manages to throw Luffy up from the water to me. I catch him by the arm, and overhead toss him and the huge sack he’s carrying onto the deck. He makes a wet slapping sound as he impacts, startling screams from my companions.

Zoro and Sanji follow him up onto the railing with sacks of their own. “What the fuck is going on?” Zoro asks, looking up at the sky in confusion. “We weren’t gone long enough for it to be dark out.”

“Thank god you’re alive! How did you get away from the turtle?!” Usopp cries.

“Turtle? I don’t care about a turtle. There was fuck all in the way of sky island information down there,” Sanji complains.

“Mostly just junk, to be honest. And that spikey whatever the fuck almost killed us! Next time you’re gonna warn us about something, *warn better!”* Zoro snaps.

“Sorry, sorry,” I grumble.

“But seriously, how did you get out of the turtle's mouth?” Usopp asks again.

“What turtle?” Zoro groans.

“That’s weird, he’s just floating there with his mouth open now. Guess that’s how you got out.” Usopp muses.

Sanji and Zoro both turn around and their jaws drop. “We were in that thing's mouth?!” they yell in unison.

“Nothing gets past you guys, does it? That’s the turtle that ate the ship you were in!” Usopp shrieks.

“Why is it so dark out?” Luffy asks, shaking the water out of his hair.

“We have to get out of here!” Masira’s voice yells from the other ship.

“Is that a monkey? What’s going on?” Luffys asks again, looking more confused by the second.

“BEHIND YOU!” someone from the other ship suddenly screams.

We all turn. My heart drops out of my ass.

And I thought the turtle was massive—

The fucking humongous gigantic gargantuan colossal *astronomically* ***leviathan*** angel shapes stare down at us with pikes raised. Three, then five.

“Oh my god,” I choke out.

I know they’re just shadows from people up in Skypiea. I know they couldn’t hurt us from here if they wanted. I know they aren’t really behemoths the size of a fucking *tarrasque—*

Still.

“FUCKING MONSTERS! THERE’S FUCKING MONSTERS!” me and Luffy scream at the same time as Masira.

Our escape is a blur. I remember pumping my arms viciously on the oars, I remember screaming the whole time, I remember Nami nailing me in the head with her shoe to make me stop, things only really clear up once we’re back in the sunlight.

“Impossible,” Zoro huffs.

“Nothing could or should be that big,” Usopp wheezes, falling to the ground.

I bury my head in my hands and drop to my knees beside him. “I hate the Grand Line,” I whimper. “I could have been home eating chips and watching anime right now. Stupid *shitty* pizza.”

_____

“Why did you guys even bother diving? All you brought back was junk!” Nami yells, shaking her fist at the boys. Luffy has shoved himself into a rusted medieval suit of armour and is marching back and forth with a half destroyed sword.

I pluck up a rusted morion helmet and brush some filth off it. “I dunno, we could probably hawk some of this stuff to an antiquer,” I muse.

“Half of it’s just rust holding hands! None of this is going to help us get to the sky island!” she groans, kicking over a pile of plates while Zoro and Sanji make upset sounds.

I pick up the octopus and try to pry it off the shit it's stuck to. “So, takoyaki tonight?”

Luffy spins around so fast the armour disintegrates around him. “YEAH—! No it broke!” he wails, falling to the ground.

“Nami! I got you a pretty shell!” Sanji says with a bright smile, holding out a pink scallop.

Nami spins on her heel with a frustrated scream. “I don’t want it, fool!”

I finally manage to get the octopus off and hand it to Zoro. It immediately attaches itself firmly to his face. I nudge a few of the fucked up swords to the side and drag a familiar shape out of the pile of junk.

“This is a great find,” I say, picking a pile of plates out of the belly of the waver. “And more proof of the sky island.”

Nami leans down over me from the railing. “How so? It just looks like a weird boat to me.”

I chuckle. “In a way… No, I think you specifically are gonna love this. We won't be able to use it unless we get an expert to fix it up, but that shouldn't be too much of a hassle once we’re up there.”

“Alright, sure. That still doesn’t explain what it is,” Nami grunts, looking more annoyed by the second.

“It’s called a waver, it’s a transportation device,” I explain.

“Huh. Interesting. Now why don’t you put aside this waver and get to finding out HOW THE HELL WE CAN GET INTO THE SKY!” she yells, spinning back away from the rail.

“Yeesh,” I grumble, turning back to the pile of shit. Sanji ambles up and offers me the shell. I take it with a smile and give him a kiss on the cheek in return. He then pries the octopus off Zoro’s face and disappears into the kitchen.

“Jaya? Must be their home base,” Nami’s voice drifts from above us.

A dish of takoyaki is pressed into my hands and I refuse to think about how fast that was made as Luffy launches past me to the rail with his own dish in his hands. “Jaya? Is that where we’re going next?”

“You’re the Captain, it’s up to you!” she snaps.

“Ok! To Jaya at full speed!” he commands.

“Just so we’re all aware, this will have to be an in and out trip so our Log Pose doesn’t reset. Also, Jaya itself is a bit of a… oh, how do I put this. It sucks ass,” I say, practically inhaling my food. Christ, I don’t think I’ll ever get over how good takoyaki is. I fucking love squid.

“We’ll need some luck then, and hope the time for the Pose reset is at least a few days. And what do you mean it sucks?” Nami asks.

I grimace and look off to the side. “Well… It’s kind of a lawless pirate slum. And not the fun kind.” It’s kinda like a lame Tortuga. Wait, isn’t there an actual Pirate Island somewhere in the New World? Where Blackbeard makes his base?

“We’ll be fast then! I still wanna go to the sky island!” Luffy announces.

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I’m sitting at the back of the ship, legs dangling between the rails and staring over the horizon with my spyglass when Robin sits on the balustrade beside me.

I lower the spyglass to glance up at her. She just stares down at me with that same old mild smile that touches nothing but her mouth. “That’s a very nice spyglass, Detective Domino,” she comments.

I stare down at it and trace my fingers over the stamped insignia. “Thank you,” I say carefully. “It was a gift.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh? That’s quite the gift. May I?”

And she holds her hand out.

I stare at it for a beat, contemplating, before I slowly place it in her palm.

She lifts it to her eye with a delicate grasp, twisting it around and retracting then extending it before her gaze focuses on the stamp. “Hm, expert craftsmanship. And it’s very well cared for, despite the fact you can tell it’s been well used. And this coin…” her fingers trace the same reverent path mine did, “do you know where it’s from?”

I silently shake my head. She hums. “Well, the stamping itself isn’t very detailed, but it doesn’t appear to be any kind of berri I’ve come across. Perhaps a commemorative coin, or a currency from a kingdom I’m unfamiliar with,” she muses, looking it over critically for a long moment like she’s committing it to memory. Then she hands it back.

I frown down at it for a second. “Huh. Guess it’s a mystery then.”

She gives me a sly smile and I swear to god something flickers in her eyes. “I hear those are your specialty.”

“WHAAA! THEY’VE BEEN SHOT DOWN!” Chopper suddenly screams from the other side of the ship.

“Ed! We’re gonna cook seagulls!” Luffy’s voice follows. My fingers tighten on the barrel of my spyglass.

“I wonder what that’s about…” Robin murmurs, eyes locked on me in an unreadable look while she fiddles with the edge of her cowboy hat.

I ignore her and get to my feet. She follows suit. By the time we’ve rounded the cabin, the island of Jaya and the city of Mock Town are in view.

“It looks like a resort!” Usopp awes.

“Didn’t you say this place was a pirate slum? Why’s it look so nice?” Nami asks.

I scowl at the city and the ships that clearly belong to pirates as we pull into the harbour. “Don’t let that fool you, this place is rotten. Maybe leave your coin purses on board, and we can’t leave the ship unattended for a second.”

Luffy and Zoro hop off board without a care. “There are all sorts of characters here,” Luffy snickers.

“Seems like a fun place,” Zoro muses. Then the two of them jaunt off into the town.

A light tug on my sleeve prompts me to turn to Robin. She jerks her head toward the shore and I squint at her. She raises an eyebrow and tugs again. I sigh and nod. Between one blink and the next she has us off the ship and on the dock.

“Try not to get lost in the crowd, Detective,” Robin murmurs.

I scowl at her. “I don’t get lost. I’m not Zoro.” Though I have been getting lost quite often… I hope Zoro’s sense of direction isn’t contagious.

She gives me a smirk. “Of course, pardon my implying otherwise.” She dances through the crowd with an ease I find myself jealous of, and I have to use the hard won crowd weaving skills that came from spending all of middle school short as hell to keep up.

“There a reason you’re taking me with you?” I ask.

She glances back at me briefly. “I assumed this kind of information gathering would be right up your alley. Am I wrong?”

I sigh and smile. “No, I suppose you’re right.” I crack my knuckles and slip past a large gentleman to catch up to her. “Then let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Common Usopp W this chapter.

Next stop: Jaya proper and all the terrible shit that comes with it.

Also you crazy motherfuckers who draw fanart for this fic, I am literally in love with you??? It's all so beautiful??? If you'd like to check it all out, or check out any other art from this fic, it's all on my Tumblr.

Chapter 45: Chapter Forty Five: Can I Be Part Of The Problem, Or Part Of The Blame?

Chapter Summary

Vulture Culture - Fangclub

“If another person tries to rob me I’m *burning this fucking island down,”* I hiss.

Chapter Notes

Real talk does Ed... ever have fun on adventures? Like, they're constantly getting fucked by the world. And yes that's entirely my fault, but goddamn if it ain't hilarious.

It's important y'all know I write the chapter notes while I'm writing or after I've written the chapters so sometimes I say shit like this and then get to look back like YIKES. I'm literally writing the last chapter of this saga rn and like... yeah babe you do do that. You do that A LOT.

HAPPY OCTOBER!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jaya sucks.

Jaya sucks *hard.*

“If another person tries to rob me I’m *burning this fucking island down,”* I hiss.

Robin pats me on the shoulder and tuts. “There, there. Ah, here we are.”

We come to a stop outside what looks like it passes for a clothing store and go inside. Robin strolls right up to the counter to start chatting with the cashier, but I take my time picking

through the selection. I pick out a large tan button up, brown cargo shorts, a thick black belt, and a red sash to tie it together. Pirate outfit. Disgruntled explorer.

I saunter up behind Robin at the counter and put down 5,000 berri. It's nice to be generous. The lady working there barely glances at me long enough to pass a bag over then continues chatting with Robin, and I take a moment to look out the window.

"Detective Domino," Robin suddenly says. I turn back to her with a hum. "Is there somewhere you need to be?" I raise my eyebrow. "You keep looking off into the distance like you have an appointment to keep," she elaborates.

I furrow my eyebrow and chew on my lip. "No, no appointment. There is somewhere I think I should be though…"

She chuckles under her breath. "Then why are you here with me? Go. I can take care of things here. I'll even bring your things back to the ship."

I blink at her. "Are you sure?"

She scoffs and gives me a gentle shove towards the door, a hand plucking my bag off the counter and tucking it away under her arm. "I assure you I'm capable. Off with you."

I offer her a small smile over my shoulder before I exit back onto Mock Town's dirty streets. Fuck, ok. Where the hell is that bar?

I wander down the street with my head on a swivel. This whole place is a goddamn mess, and I don't exactly know the bar's name…

"What's with the commotion over there?" someone grunts ahead of me. That's when laughter like a hyena reaches my ears.

“Bellamy’s crew is working someone over in there!” someone else responds.

My feet are already moving. The old saloon style doors do fuck all to conceal the sounds of violence, shattering glass, and rancorous laughter. The doors squeal loudly as I stroll in. The entire bar quiets for a second.

“What’s this? You here to watch the show, little lady?” Bellamy’s First Mate, Sar-something I think, jeers as I cross through the alcohol stained floors.

I don’t look at him at all. I only have eyes from my bloody, bruised, alcohol soaked Captain and swordsman. Zoro is slumped in the ruins of the bar with Nami at his side, her wide desperate eyes pleading at me to *do something,* and my Captain.

My Captain. My wonderful, selfish, and unbelievably kind Captain. He’s on the ground, covered in shattered glass, alcohol and blood, and he’s staring up at me with those eyes like black chasms and I can hear his voice without him ever having to open his mouth.

Don’t fight them.

I walk across crushed glass and broken chairs. I walk until I’m kneeling in front of my Captain and those big eyes of his haven’t blinked once. I use my thumb to wipe some blood from his face. “Oh darling, you have glass in your hair,” I murmur. The silence in the bar prevails as I straighten up. “Well, let’s go,” I say.

It starts with someone snorting, followed by snickers, then full blown laughter from the entire bar. I pull Luffy’s arm over my shoulder and motion for Nami to grab Zoro. Then I start walking to the door.

Someone steps in my way. I have to tilt my head up to meet the sunglass shaded eyes of Sar-whatever. “You leaving so soon, sweetheart? Why’re you and the girl sticking around with guys like these? Why not let me buy you two? How much?”

“What was that?” Nami mutters behind me. “You want to *buy* us?”

“Sure. Come over here, it’ll be fun,” he says with a condescending smile.

“Sorry, I’m not interested in joining a third rate gang of bullies,” Nami scoffs. “Besides, you couldn’t afford us.”

Sar-whatever tenses up and I have to tilt my head down to hide my smirk. “Haha… So you think you’re something special?” he sneers. Then he bends down so he’s face to face with me. “And you?” I blink up at him blankly. “You certainly aren’t the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen, but I’m sure I could show you a good time,” he boasts with a sleazy smirk.

I can’t help it. I literally can’t.

I burst out laughing in his face.

The growing laughter in the pub quiets once more while I cackle. “Ah! That’s a good one. At least you have a sense of humor going for you, it’s certainly not your looks keeping girls around!”

His face explodes in anger. “Why you — you stuck up slut—” he chokes out.

I snort. “And so original, too. We’ll be leaving now.” And I try to shoulder past him.

He catches me by the hair and yanks me back. I grunt at the pain in my skull and squint up at him as he gets right up in my face. “You better watch your mouth, you little bitch. You may be hot shit wherever you and your sad sack friends are from, but around here you’re *nothing.”*

My fingers twitch towards my gun and Luffy’s hand clamps over my wrist. I glance down and meet his eyes once more. He barely shakes his head, but it’s enough.

“Pack up your sissy friends and get out while you still can… small fries…” Bellamy sneers from the half destroyed bar. Nami storms past me, dragging Zoro with her. I shake Sar-guy’s hand from my hair and follow suit.

Mugs of beer, chunks of splintered wood, and jeers and insults of all kinds follow us out as well.

“The sky island does exist,” a voice like gravel calls from the road.

I stop cold.

My blood roars to life in my ears so loud I swear Nami can hear it beside me. The cold, cold, feeling of a multitude of eyes watching me from every angle like a bug under a microscope freezes me in place.

I slowly turn my face to the man sitting in the street. I can’t hear a damn word he’s saying. The Kill Bill sirens start blaring in my head.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him. One lucky shot. ***Kill him—***

My brain catches up to my inner dialogue. I focus all that intent and feeling towards the pirates back in the bar.

“Wow kid! That’s some bloodlust. Those guys must have really pissed you off! Zehahaha!” Blackbeard cackles. “Your comebacks were impressive too! You’ve got guts!”

You goddamn idiot, you let him feel that shit and he’ll fucking eviscerate you!

Luffy straightens up beside me. From the corner of my eyes I can see his own, shaded by his hat, and Zoro righting himself as well.

“This new age they spoke of… It’s rubbish!” Blackbeard throws his head back. “The age of pirate’s dreams is over?! Huh?! Zehahaha!” he slams his bottle of alcohol to the ground, “PEOPLE’S DREAMS… DON’T EVER END!”

His words ring true. I still find myself cold. Luffy is stoic beside me. My singular seastone bullet is heavy in my pocket.

“Ain’t that right?!” Blackbeard cackles. The pirates about the street all laugh and jeer at him. He just keeps cackling. “It isn’t easy being great! Let them laugh! If you’re aiming for the top… You don’t always need your fists to show your might! Zehahaha!”

Zoro turns and starts walking away. “Let’s go.”

“Uh-huh… Luffy? Ed?” Nami prompts.

“Well I won't keep you, you seem to be in a hurry,” Blackbeard says, rising to his feet. Logically I know he’s only twice my height. He still feels more massive than the shadow angels of Skypiea right now. “I hope you make it to the sky island,” he says over his shoulder.

My seastone bullet isn’t just heavy, it’s burning a hole through my pocket.

Luffy’s hand lands on my wrist, and then we’re following after Zoro.

“Hey! Maybe that guy knows how to get to Skypiea! I wonder who he is,” Nami says, trailing after us.

“Well… It’s not just one guy,” Luffy responds.

“Huh? Not just one guy? Then what..?” Nami murmurs.

“There’s more than one… I think…” Zoro trails off.

“There’s no knowledge that… thing could give us that would be worth making a deal with the devil…” I mutter.

“...Huh? What do you mean? Was there somebody with him? Hey!” Nami questions as the three of us walk ahead.

———

Nami doesn’t stop glaring the whole walk. It really only boils over once we get back to the ship.

“You guys! You look like shit, what happened?!” Usopp hollers from the deck.

“Nami, Ed, are you alright?!” Sanji cries, nearly dropping his cigarette.

“Aaah! D — d — d — doctor! Someone call a doctor!” Chopper screams.

“You’re the doctor!” Usopp scolds, smacking him upside the head as we board the ship. Chopper immediately gets to work cleaning and bandaging the boys while Nami leans against the rail and I sit down next to them.

“So what’d ya fight? A giant monster?” Usopp asks.

“Nah. A pirate. But nevermind that, it’s over now,” Luffy responds, barely sitting still enough for Chopper to work. Zoro hums in agreement.

Nami glowers at them. “It may be over for you, but it isn't for me! How can you call yourselves men! Men don’t shrink away from a fight! We should blow this whole place to smithereens!”

“You’re the one who made us promise not to fight,” Zoro grumbles.

“Stop dredging up ancient history or I’ll kick your butt too!” Nami howls, shaking her fist at Zoro while he shrinks back from her.

“Why is she so mad? You two are the ones who got beat up, not her,” Usopp mumbles aside to Luffy. Luffy just shrugs.

“Did you find anything out about Skypiea?” Chopper asks hopefully.

Nami rounds on him with a look of pure murder and he lunges behind me crying.

“Skypiea?” she grits out. “Who even cares? Everyone started laughing at the mere mention of it.” She suddenly lets out a scream and we all jump back. “WHY WERE THEY LAUGHING?! HUH?! I DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING FUNNY!”

Dear sweet white lord Jesus, Nami is fucking scary when she’s pissed!

Then she rounds on me. “And what about you, huh? Why didn’t you start cracking skulls as soon as you arrived?!” she demands.

I turn my scowl from the floor to her. “Those guys were barely worth the effort to laugh at. You can’t change the way everyone thinks of you. Proving yourself to guys like that is a waste of time.”

She stares down at me with a scowl. “You don’t have anybody you want to prove yourself to?”

I turn my eyes away from her. A bag is placed beside me and I look up at Robin as she strolls onto the deck. “Oh, welcome back Robin! Would you like dinner or a bath first?” Sanji fawns.

Luffy perks from beside me. “Where’d you go?”

Robin lifts her own bag. “Shopping for clothes and information about Skypiea. The Detective briefly joined me, but… Ah. It seems your appointment was more of a *dis*appointment.”

Nami whirls around and starts screaming again while I hug my bag to my chest. “That was clever. I liked that pun,” I mumble.

Robin passes off a piece of paper to Luffy as she strolls across the deck. “Ah! A treasure map!” Luffy cheers, unrolling it and slapping it on the floor.

“That’s just a regular map,” Usopp corrects.

“It’s of the island. We’re currently in Mock Town, on the left. The X on the opposite coast marks where Jaya’s biggest weirdo lives,” Robin explains.

“Weirdo?” Luffy and Usopp ask at the same time.

“His name is Mont Blanc Cricket. He was chased out of town for talking about his dreams. Seems you have something in common,” Robin muses.

Nami starts growling under her breath so I grab Zoro and Luffy by the backs of their shirts and start dragging them across the deck.

“What’s happening?” Zoro asks, craning his neck up to stare at me confused, but letting himself get dragged regardless.

“You two smell like crap and are covered in shitty alcohol. You fuckheads are gonna take a goddamn bath while I get changed.” I command, opening the door to the cannon deck with my foot to get to the bathroom.

“What? No! I had a bath two days ago, I still have a day until I have to again!” Luffy whines.

I wrinkle my nose at him. “...Please don’t bring that up. If I think too hard about how often you’re not actually clean when we sleep together I’ll vomit. Now go do your thing and don’t fucking come out until you *sparkle.”*

Then I kick the pair of them through the door and slam it.

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When Shoujou and his merry band of idiots get in our way, the boys are squeaky clean and the deck is no longer being stunk up by cheap ale. So that’s a win for me.

Shoujou’s ship is just as big and weird as Masira’s, and Shoujou himself is just as big and weird too. I am entirely not in the mood to deal with this shit.

“Hey!” I call over. Shoujou’s ape-like face turns to me. “We’re friends of Masira’s. We’re on our way to see Cricket. Can we skip the toll and just go?” I ask impatiently.

Shoujou blinks at me a couple times. “Friends of Masira’s? On your way to see the boss? You aren’t going to cause him any trouble, are you?!”

“No!” I bark. “We aren’t assholes! Get the fuck out of the way!”

My crew all take a step back from me. “Goodness gracious. What crawled up your ass and died?” Usopp mumbles.

I scowl, cross my arms, and look off to port. “I’m in a shit mood. I want to get us to Cricket so we can get the fuck into the sky. The sea around here’s making my skin crawl.” That’s met with a whole lot of raised eyebrows and confusion. I don’t elaborate.

“Uh. As long as you aren’t going to mess with Cricket, and you’re friends of Masira… I suppose just this once you can skip the toll,” Shoujou says awkwardly, side eyeing me like I’ll leap across the considerable distance between our ships to attack him like a rabid dog.

“Thanks, you’re a gem. I like your hair! Zoro, get this fucking ship moving,” I say with false cheer, stalking back towards the galley.

“Ed and Nami are both scary when they’re upset…” I hear Chopper mumble as I go.

_____

I’m still stewing in the galley with a cup of tea when Luffy and Usopp start screaming about castles outside. By the time I get onto the deck, we’re already docked beside the giant plywood castle cutout in front of Cricket’s house.

“Only half the house is real? What a cheapskate,” Zoro grumbles.

“What kind of dreams was he talking about that got him kicked out of town?” Nami asks, glaring at the half-house.

“I don’t know the exact details, but apparently he claims there’s a huge hoard of gold on Jaya,” Robin responds.

Everyone's heads twist back to her in sync. “Gold?!”

“Dig, Chopper! Find the gold!” Nami orders, basically tossing Chopper off the ship and jumping down after him.

Luffy opens the door to the house and walks in without hesitation. “Hello? Anyone home?”

“Luffy, you can’t just walk into random people’s houses!” Usopp shrieks, scrambling down the ship and after him.

“Hey, there’s an old story book over here,” Nami calls, picking it up from the stump it was sitting on.

I jump from the rail to the shore to look over her shoulder at it. “Noland the Liar…” I murmur, reaching around Nami to trace the well worn cover.

“Noland the Liar? That brings back memories, I read that as a kid,” Sanji says, sauntering over.

“It says it was published in the North Blue, though,” Nami throws out.

“Oh I was born in the North Blue. Did I not mention that?” Sanji says with a smile.

“Really? I thought you were from the East Blue,” Usopp questions, poking his head from the house.

“I was raised in the East Blue but…” his eyes dart to mine so fast I almost miss it, his smile flattens just a bit before he perks it back up. “Nevermind that. The story is pretty famous in the North. It’s a kids story, but I heard Noland really existed a long time ago.”

I gently take the story from Nami’s hands and flip through the book. “What bullshit,” I hiss, glaring at the final page, Noland’s last words stark on the faded paper.

“What do you mean?” Nami mutters beside me.

“Ed? Is there something wrong with the story?” Sanji asks hesitantly.

I snap it shut and release a breath. “Sorry. I’m just a little…” I stop for a second, very aware of Robin’s presence still up on the rails of the ship. “It’s defamation. In the official account of this event, it’ll tell you that his crew agreed that he was lying.” I peek back at the last page again, then close it when I feel mounting frustration leak into my bones. “However, if you read any taken account from the crew post-execution, you’ll find that they actually corroborated his story, and that they publicly denounced the so-called ‘crew’ that said he lied as imposters.”

Sanji and Nami both fall silent. “So you… don’t think he was lying?” Usopp asks hesitantly.

I nod firmly, staring down at the book. “Any account of Mont Blanc Noland from the people who actually knew him are wonderful. The person those accounts talk of is not here in this story. How cruel must someone be to say such terrible things about a man already dead—” I cut myself off.

I stare down at the cover for a second, my own words replaying through my head.

Oh. I need to have a conversation with Ace.

Nami gently takes the book from my hands and puts it back on the stump. “Alright. We believe you.”

“Pray tell, Detective Domino, where did you read these accounts?” Robin suddenly says from behind me.

I jump a little and twist around to meet her inquisitive eyes. I try for a sly smile and cheesy wink. “A detective never reveals their sources.”

She gives me a very flat look. There’s a sudden scream cut off by a gurgle. We all whip around at Luffy’s voice.

“Luffy fell in the ocean!” Nami shouts.

“What the hell?!” Usopp shrieks.

Someone surges out from the water with a yell. “Who are you?!” Mont Blanc Cricket demands. “You’ve got guts making yourself at home on someone else's property. The waters around here belong to me,” he settles into a fighting stance and narrows his eyes at us. “You’ve here for the gold, aren’t you? Then die.”

I run straight at him.

Nami screams. “ED YOU DUMBASS WHAT THE HELL—”

“We’re friends of your boys, you need a doctor, I’m going in BYE—” I yell, blowing right past his stunned face and diving into the water.

I blink bubbles out of my face and swim downward. Luffy is sinking deeper into the water ahead of me. I reach him with a few pumps of my arms and a couple kicks of my legs, then swim him back up to the surface.

He hacks and coughs in my arms while I paddle us over and haul him up over the ledge. “What do you have to say for yourself?” I groan.

He spits out a fountain of water. “Sorry. There were bubbles. And then a chestnut popped up, but the chestnut was a guy and the guy pulled me in.”

I sigh and right his hat on his head.

———

Mont Blanc Cricket is unconscious on his bed while Chopper delivers his verdict. “He’s got the Bends. It’s a condition divers get when they don’t let their body decompress properly when ascending. He must be diving deep day after day without giving his body time to rest.”

“Why would he do that?” Nami mutters.

“I don’t know. But… the Bends can be fatal in some cases,” Chopper says carefully.

“BOSS ARE YOU OK?!” two voices suddenly yell in sync from the doorway as Masira and Shoujou jam themselves through it.

We all stare at each other for a long second.

“Hey there,” I say, raising a hand.

“Hello,” they both say back politely.

“Did you find your friend's brooch?” Masira asks conversationally.

“Ah, no. A shame,” I reply with no remorse.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Masira mutters. “AH! WAIT! What are you doing here with the boss?!” he demands.

“We’re giving this guy medical treatment. Go away,” Luffy grouches.

Masira and Shoujou exchange glances, then promptly burst into tears. “That’s… SO NICE OF YOU!”

After that, Luffy and them get along like a house on fire. Something about monkey to monkey communication… Either way, Cricket wakes up soon after that.

I’m sitting beside the bed filing my nails when he starts to rouse. “Mornin’ sunshine. How ya feel?” I ask.

Cricket sits up, rubbing at his neck and immediately reaching for a cigarette conveniently sat nearby. “I’m just fine. Sorry for attacking you folks. I thought you were after my gold,” he shoots me a look. “It’s been a while since anyone has been crazy enough to bum rush me like that.”

I shrug. “Surprises are my specialty. I’m Ed,” I hold my hand not holding the file out of him.

He huffs and takes it in a firm shake. “Cricket.”

“You have gold?!” Nami cries, berri signs lighting up her eyes.

“Don’t even think about it,” Usopp admonishes.

“Diamond guy! We wanna ask you something!” Luffy hollers, jaunting into the room.

“What do you want to ask?” Cricket asks, lighting up his cigarette.

“We wanna go to the sky island! How do we get there?” Luffy asks with a big smile.

Cricket raises an eyebrow at him. “Sky island..? Harharharhar! You actually believe that story?” he cackles.

Nami, of course, tries to lunge at him. Usopp, of course, has to stop her.

“You mean it doesn’t exist?!” Luffy whines.

Cricket hunches down and chuckles under his breath. “Well, there was one man who said it did. But he went down in history as a liar and his family have been objects of ridicule for centuries,” He says bitterly.

Luffy turns to Usopp with a gasp. “It’s not me!” Usopp shouts in offence.

“Noland the Liar… It’s an ancient tale…” Cricket mumbles around an exhale of smoke.

“See we have different names!” Usopp exclaims. Then he pauses. “Wait what?”

_____

“So… you’re his descendant and the whole thing took place *here?!”* Nami shouts.

Cricket nods, taking another hit of his cig. “He’s my great great great great great… You get the idea. Anyway, it’s just a silly story about a distant ancestor. I probably only have a drop of his blood in me. The Mont Blanc family was driven off and forced to live in shame. Even to this day we’re still ridiculed. But we never held it against him.”

“Why not?” Chopper asks.

“Because we know that Noland was no liar,” Cricket states. “In the book Noland’s last words were ‘I know! The mountain of gold must have sunk into the sea!’ It shows him grinning like an idiot. But he actually died with tears rolling down his cheeks.”

I tune out the rest of his explanation to go back to sawing at my nails with my file. Do they need to be filed down more? Absolutely not. If they get any shorter I won’t be able to gouge eyes out. Do I want to stop and tune back into the conversation? Also no.

I’m forced to anyway.

“NONE OF THAT MATTERS TO ME!” Cricket yells. I jump in my seat and nearly fumble my file, only managing to catch it at the last second. “Because of that fool’s blood in my veins… total strangers made fun of me all through my childhood! Do you have any idea what that’s like?!”

I cast my eyes around the room. Luffy’s mouth is in a tight line. Sanji is sitting on the opposite side of the room from me, eyes shadowed and simply letting his own cigarette burn in his mouth instead of actually smoking it.

Dear fucking lord this trauma is touching EVERYONE.

I reeeeeally need to have that conversation with Ace. Uuuugh but how the fuck do I even start addressing his self worth issues if I technically shouldn’t know the root of them? Do I just wait for him to tell me on his own?

*That could take months. Months he **may not have.** Fuck, what are my other options?*

…This is going to be so much goddamn harder than I originally thought. Who knew changing shit would have so many hoops to jump through?

I tune back into the conversation. “Those fools… *saved me.* Can you understand that?” Cricket says with a small but genuine smile.

I snort under my breath. “Yeah, we feel you,” I murmur.

“Sure I can. True comrades lift a man's heart,” Usopp sniffles.

“I’m tired of monkey stories,” Luffy blurts.

Usopp wacks him on the head. “Then don’t listen! Or grit your teeth and bear it!” he shrieks.

“Like I said,” Luffy starts, pushing Usopp’s head out of the way, “I want to go to the sky island!” he shouts.

Cricket stares with a smirk for a seconds before pulling a worn book off the ledge beside his bed. “Heh. Aren’t you impatient. If you believe tales like that you’ll become a laughing stock like me and Noland.”

Luffy blinks a couple times before leaving forward with a wide eyed grin. “Are you saying he went to sky island?!”

“Well, he didn’t say he went himself,” Cricket explains, thumbing through the pages.

“Is that the log of Noland himself?” Nami awes.

“Yup,” Cricket says, tossing the open book to her. “Read this passage.”

Nami mumbles the lines under her breath as her eyes trace the words. “Hm. He mentions that waver thing you talked about, Ed. And sky fish? Yup! A sea in the sky, just like you and Robin said!”

As the boys and Nami all start celebrating, Cricket slips from his bed and out the door. Luffy and Usopp grab me by the arms and start swinging me around chanting “It’s real! It’s real!” and laughing at the tops of their lungs.

I can’t help but laugh along.

Chapter End Notes

We don't talk about how Blackbeard was spitting facts because we don't like him. Also sorry to the babes who wanted more Robin and Ed adventures, but if you thought Ed was gonna miss out on that pivotal moment you crazy. Ed & Robin bonding will happen I promise lmao.

Sanji, casually dropping that he's from the North Blue: Haha.
Sanji, remembering Ed is a detective and is just crazy enough to put two and two together: Fuck wait—

And here's art for Ed's outfit for the saga!

Chapter 46: Chapter Forty Six: Whatever I've Done, I Did It For Love

Chapter Summary

One More Hour - Tame Impala

I shrug. "I have a call to make. Besides…" I shiver, "spiders, my guy. *Jungle spiders."*

Chapter Notes

I DIDN'T REALIZE UNTIL I WAS SETTING THIS CHAPTER UP BUT IT'S ALMOST 5K HOW DO I KEEP GETTING AWAY WITH THIS—

Ahhhh the end of this saga is so fun. There's a special gift waiting there for y'all. Also I've decided I'm writing G8 lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't bother paying attention to Cricket's explanation on the cloud and the Knock-Up Stream. Zoro is napping nearby so I simply snuggle up in his lap and take a well deserved break.

I continue ignoring them even when Zoro gets up, though I do groan my protests, and even when the yelling about whatever the fuck happens I remain face down in the grass enjoying a moment of relaxation.

I do have to go back to being a person when Luffy picks me up by the back of my shirt and hauls me inside. "Food time Ed!"

It's basically a party. The food is delicious as always, and I crack a bottle of my schnapps so I can participate in the drinking as well. In my defence, I don't drink enough to get drunk. Just a little tipsy. Alright maybe the wrong side of tipsy, I fucking knew alcohol would be my undoing—

I digress. It's a nice evening. And the schnapps isn't nearly as sweet as I first thought it would be, so I all but chug the shit. Although… Well once I'm a little, uh, *liquored up* so to speak, I do wander to the ship to grab the President and his new pale bud. I should name this guy…

I plop down in the corner of the house and set the snails in front of me. I tap my chin and stare at the white Transponder Snail I pilfered from Alabasta. "Hm… Prime Minister. I've got a President, so I need a Prime Minister," I declare to my slimy observers. They both blink slowly up at me.

My bravado deflates a little. "Don't judge me, I was never very good at naming things." It's very hard to concentrate on my snail pals when the human pals won't stop screaming about gold and birds and journal entries. "You see what I have to deal with?" I say to the snails dryly. They blink unsympathetically at me.

"SHIT!" the members of the Monkey Mountain Alliance suddenly scream together. I jolt, a yelp breaking free of my mouth.

"What?! What's wrong?!" Usopp shrieks.

"This is bad! You have to go into the jungle! Go south!" Cricket demands.

"Huh? What're you saying? You crazy, old man?" Luffy asks.

Cricket aggressive points at a golden statue of a bird I ignored him taking out. "You have to catch one of these birds! Fast!"

"What? Why?" Usopp yelps.

"What do we need a bird for?" Sanji asks, confused.

“Listen carefully! The Knock-Up Stream is directly south, you thought about how you’re gonna get there?!” Cricked grits out.

“Can’t we just go straight?” Luffy asks petulantly.

“This is the Grand Line! Once you’re out to sea there’s no way to know your directions!” Cricket yells. “You’ll have to rely on a south bird! Some animals have an innate sense of direction.”

Nami nods. “Right. I’ve heard of that, like pigeons or salmon.”

“Heh! Zoro, you’re dumber than an animal!” Luffy laughs.

“In a way he kind of reminds me of a headless pigeon…” I muse with a smirk.

“You two should talk! You’re stupider than a *clam,* and *you’re* as directionally challenged as I am!” Zoro squawks.

“The south bird is the best of them all. No matter where it is, it always knows its direction. You’ve gotta go get one! You can’t make it to the sky island without it!” Cricket explains.

Luffy, Usopp, and Chopper’s jaws all drop. “WHAT?!”

“And you’re only telling us this now?!” Usopp cries.

“It’s the middle of the night! You expect us to go now?!” Zoro squawks again.

“Quit whining! There’s no time! You go and we’ll get to work on your ship! We shouldn’t have been partying in the first place!” Cricket shouts, shooing everyone out of the house.

I squint off into the jungle. “Yeah… I think I’m just gonna stay here.”

The group whips around to me. “Hah?!”

I shrug. “I have a call to make. Besides…” I shiver, “spiders, my guy. *Jungle spiders.”*

Nami and Sanji go white in the face. “Spiders?” Nami squeaks.

“Um. Maybe I’ll stay behind too. To keep Ed safe,” Sanji says with a nervous laugh.

“Shut up you too! Let’s go!” Zoro barks, catching the bundle of nets Cricket tosses him.

“Hey Zoro. 9,000 berri Robin will be the one to catch the bird,” I say with a smirk. Robin chuckles under her breath and Zoro squints at me before giving me a terse nod.

“Listen to me, you get that bird before sunrise! Do not fail!” Cricket demands.

With nods of various confidences from the group, they set off.

While the Monkey Mountain Alliance gets to work, I drag a chair to the opposite side of the house to block some of the construction sounds and set my snails up. A couple things hooked together later, I have a wire-tap proof snail connection ready to be used.

I ring up Ace immediately. The Transponder rings for a beat or two before it picks up. “Hello?” Ace groans into the mic, the President's face taking on Ace’s freckles and a sleepy expression.

“Hey Ace. Sorry I didn’t mean to wake you up,” I apologize. Smooth, I forgot it’s the middle of the fucking night.

Ace hums. “No worries, I just got done partying with some clown. Was there something you needed, or just calling for a chat?”

I frown for a second. “Um. Just a chat, I guess. Wait, clown? Oh my god, were you with Buggy?”

Ace laughs. “Yeah, I figured you knew him. He did *not* have anything nice to say about you.”

“Aw, that cunt. Anyways, how’s your search been going?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

He groans. “I think I’m getting closer, but still no dice yet.” I pointedly keep my mouth shut. “How about you? Anything new?”

I hum. “Well, we’re going up to the sky.”

The snail blinks at me. “The… sky? You’re going up to a sky island?” he asks slowly.

I shrug. “Yeh. We going to the sky. Do you think they have snail reception up there?”

He considered for a second. “Probably not. You’ll be on your own up there. Any news you’d like to give me now?”

I pause for a second. Should… should I tell him about Blackbeard?

“No,” I decide, the words tasting… weird in my mouth. “Nah, no news. Though it’s doubtful, if we find anything while we’re up top I’ll let you know when we get back down. You keep yourself safe, you ding dong,” I order.

He laughs. “I’m more worried about you than me. Who knows what kind of trouble you and my idiot little brother can get up to in the sky?”

I laugh right back. “Hey now, I’m very responsible.” My mouth tightens as I remember the point of this call. “Hey, Ace? What would you say if—”

A crash from the other side of the house shuts me up.

“Ed?” Ace calls, the snail taking on a worried expression.

“Shit, I don’t know what that was. I gotta go. Let’s hope my tipsy aim is better than my sober aim,” I mutter, reaching for my gun with one hand and going to put the Transponder down with the other.

“Wait! Ed, what’s going on?” Ace demands.

“I just said I don't know, shitface. I’m gonna go check it out, love you bye,” then I slam the receiver down. I unbutton and shrug off my new shirt and drape it across the snails to hide them from view.

I stalk slowly around the side of the house. A familiar laugh sounds from the other side. *Shit.* Oh fucking balls, I forgot about *Bellamy.*

I peek around the plywood castle. Ah fuck, Bellamy is squaring up with Cricket. I take a quick scan of the other pirates. Wait… Where’s Sar-whatever—

Something hard smashes into the back of my head. I drop forward out of my hiding place with a pained yell, free hand coming up to clutch at my ringing skull. A different hand gets there first. I'm slammed face first into the ground.

The world spins. I spit a mouthful of blood into the grass. "You people have no respect for a recovering concussion patient," I groan.

The hand on my head is familiar, it winds into the hair at the base of my skull and yanks. I gasp as my head is forced back and my neck is strained. I can feel blood sliding down my nose over my mouth.

Someone, Cricket, yells my name. My vision is swimming from the hit, but I make eye contact with Bellamy as he flashes a manic grin and lands a terrible hit on a distracted Cricket.

I can taste blood on my teeth as someone leans down to my ear. "How you like me now, slut?" Sarquiss hisses. Then he slams my face toward the ground. I have one last thought before the world goes black.

Jaya *sucks*.

_____

I come to with grass in my mouth and ringing in my ears.

The grass tastes like copper, and the ringing almost sounds like my Captain. I'm rolled onto my back. Oh, it is my Captain. I still can't quite hear him, but he looks like he's panicking. Aw, that's no good. I don't like when he panics.

I clumsily reach a hand up and smack it onto his face. "G'morning sunshine!" I slur with a bloody grin.

“What happened?” he demands, his voice finally overpowering the gong that had a monopoly on my thoughts.

I frown. Uh… Oh.

“Got caught off guard. M’sorry,” I mumble, trying to twist onto my side. It sends a hot flash of pain through my ribs I grit my teeth through. Oh that motherfucker, did he keep fucking hitting me after knocking me out?

My eyes catch on the Merry. I feel my heart stop for a second.

The front half of the ship is separate from the rest in a barely clean slash. The main mast is toppled. Merry’s face is in the *dirt* . “Those pieces of shit…” I choke out, fingernails dragging through the dirt. “Those spineless pathetic *cowardly pieces of shit!”* My face scrunches up as tears well in my eyes. I duck my head down as Luffy’s hand lands on my back. “M’sorry,” I repeat, “I let Merry get hurt. I’m sorry.”

What kind of pathetic fucking First Mate gets ambushed like that and lets their goddamn home be desecrated? Oh I’m a fucking idiot. My god, what have I let happen?

Luffy’s hand squeezes on my shoulder. “Ed,” he says, voice firm, “it’s not your fault.” It’s hard to believe that. He plants his straw hat on my head.

Usopp comes up on my other side as Luffy rushes over to Cricket. “C’mon Ed, let’s get you up,” he murmurs.

I grip the edge of the hat with one hand, catch his overalls in the other and stare up at him with watery eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m *so sorry,”* I grit out.

Usopp frowns down at me. “I don’t want you to apologize.”

I vehemently shake my head. *"No.* I stayed behind, I had a responsibility to make sure she didn't get hurt. So I'm sorry."

Usopp scowls and sits me up. I grimace at the pain it sends through my side as Usopp brings a handkerchief up to wipe at the crusted blood around my mouth. "You'll both be alright. That's what matters to me," he spits. "We can repair the Merry, and Chopper can fix you up. So what's done is done."

"LUFFY!" Nami suddenly screams from the house. "The gold ingots! They're gone!"

We all stop in place. "FUCK!" I shout, slamming my fist into the ground. Usopp smacks me gently on the shoulder and tilts my face back up to keep wiping blood off.

Cricket pushes himself up into a sitting position. "It's alright… That junk doesn't matter. Forget about it. You have too…"

"How can you say that?! You dived for ten years to find that gold! You almost killed yourself for it!" Usopp yells, his gentle hold on my face getting tighter before I smack it off. "Sorry," he mutters.

"Shut up," Cricket snaps. "That doesn't matter. It's *our* problem. If the Monkey Mountain Allied Force gets to work, we can have your ship ready by morning. You folks get ready to sail. I won't fail! You're going to the sky!" he declares, pure grit and determination coming off him in waves.

Usopp's other hand, still on my shoulder, loosens.

"Luffy," Zoro calls from behind us. We all turn, and are met with the ugly spray painted Jolly Roger of the Donquixote Pirates.

“That’s Bellamy’s mark!” Nami gasps.

“Want help?” Zoro offers.

Luffy shakes his head. “No, I’ll handle this alone.”

“No way! Don’t even think about doing anything crazy, we have to set sail in three hours!” Nami shrieks.

Luffy turns to Robin. “If I follow the coast, will I get to town?”

She blinks. “Yes.”

Cricket jolts forward. “Kid, where are you going?! Don’t do anything rash, you don’t know who you’re dealing with!”

He’s stopped by a white scabbard lowering in front of him, handle first. “If you want to stop him, you’ll have to use this,” Zoro states.

“Hey Luffy,” I call, grabbing onto Usopp’s arm to rise on shaky feet. “Give his First Mate a punch from me too. I’m a vindictive slut.”

Usopp and Sanji choke while Luffy gives me a tight nod. “I’ll be back by sunrise,” he announces, cracking his knuckles and starting down the path to Mock Town.

“Three hours, Luffy! Any later than that and we lose any chance of getting to the sky island!” Nami yells after him. She heaves a sigh as he runs out of sight. “Guess it’s up to luck, at this point.”

———

“You sure you’re alright, Ed?” Chopper asks one last time.

“I promise I’m ok, Chopper. If I start feeling anything off you’re the first that’ll know,” I sooth, patting a furry cheek, slipping Luffy’s hat back on, and standing up from the stump he had me sitting on for my checkup.

“Alright… But that means *immediately!* You don’t wait for a second before you tell me!” he demands. I laugh and slip past him to walk around the house.

“Where are you going?” Sanji calls.

“I imagine I gave Ace quite a fright, hanging up like I did. I’m gonna call him back to make sure he knows I’m fine,” I hum, picking up my shirt from the ground and heaving a sigh of relief when I see my snails unharmed underneath.

With all the damage to the house and surroundings, I wasn’t sure they’d be ok. Seems I was worried for nothing. I take the two snails back over to where the rest of the Strawhats have gathered.

“Any of you wanna chat with Ace, or are you gonna help with the ship?” I ask, flopping onto the same stump as before.

“I’m gonna help the monkey guys,” Zoro states, getting up from his seat. “I’m not lazy, unlike some people.”

Sanji leaps up from his seat to run past Zoro. “What was that, you shitty mosshead?! You wanna fight?!”

Usopp gets up to follow as well. “I’m going to help as well. Merry’s our gal, she needs a familiar touch,” he says with a cheesy wink.

Nami heaves a sigh. “Now I’m gonna look bad if I don’t help,” she whines, following dejectedly. Chopper obediently trots after her. That just leaves Robin, who stares silently at the ship while her additional limbs lift planks up to Masira who just kinda blinks at them stupidly.

I chuckle, punching in Ace’s number. It barely even rings for a second before it's picked up. “Ed you crazy bitch are you dead?!” he screams down the mic.

I burst out laughing, of course. “Jesus! Cool it, fireboy! I’m alive, no worries!”

The Transponder frowns at me. “Are you sure? That was a cryptic as fuck way to end a conversation! And making me wait so long to boot! What the hell happened?!” he demands.

I bite my lip and hum high in my throat. “Riiiight… Well I may or may not have gotten ambushed. And had my shit rocked. No one else from the crew was hurt though! They weren't even here!” I’m quick to assure.

That makes Ace more upset, somehow. “EXCUSE ME?! Where the hell was Luffy during this?!”

“Dude chill, the whole crew was in the jungle looking for a bird. The fuckers just ambushed the guys we’re getting help from. And I’m not nearly as concussed as last time! So everything is fine,” I promise, thumbing the rim of the hat.

Ace lets out a strangled screeching thing that I raise an eyebrow at. “I believe he is upset that you were hurt at all, Detective Domino. It’s the principle of the matter,” Robin pipes up.

“Yes! Thank you, strange voice I don’t know!” Ace exclaims.

“Oh, yeah. You two didn’t meet. Ace, Robin, Robin, Ace. And again, it wasn’t that bad! I don’t even have any broken bones!” I groan.

“Who the fuck even got you?” Ace questions, something fiery in the snail’s eyes that I snicker at.

“Big Knife Sarquiss of the Bellamy Pirates,” I say, finally remembering that fuckass’s name. “Apparently a subset of the Donquixote Pirates, going by the symbol they left behind. Probably not very closely acquainted, if I had to guess.”

“You went and picked a fight with the Donquixote Pirates?” Ace groans.

“No! If anything they picked a fight with us. Who dumps alcohol on cute little shits like Luffy? And like I said, Doflamingo probably gives no shits about these lame fucks,” I say, fiddling with my sash.

Ace hums noncommittally. “Either way, you might wanna watch your back from now on. I hear Doflamingo is a lunatic.”

I shrug. “Eh. So am I. Maybe not as much of a psychopath as he is, but every second I spend with this crew is an ounce of my sanity to the pits. So it’ll be fine.”

He chuckles. “Alright, whatever you say. Any progress to the sky?”

“We’re taking off in around three hours. Luffy’s goofy ass will probably be late, but it’ll all work out because the universe just adores him,” I snicker.

Ace hums again. “Hey Ed?” he asks, a sudden hesitation in his voice. “About what you said earlier…”

I hum. “What did I say?”

The snail's eye stalks glance off to the side. “What you said when you hung up before…” he trails off.

I frown. “What did I say?” I repeat.

Ace is quiet for a second. “Bah. Nevermind. Have fun on your sky trip, bring me a souvenir,” he says, suddenly very upbeat.

I blink a couple times. “Yeah, sure. I’ll see what I can find.” There’s a sudden yell from the ship that has me tenseing so hard in my seat I nearly strain a muscle.

“Don’t worry Detective, the swordsman simply had a plank of wood dropped on his head,” Robin explains calmly.

I blink at her. “How the hell did he..? Yaknow what, I don't care.” I hesitate for a second, debating continuing the conversation I didn’t get to start before. Then I take a glance over at the Merry and decide it can wait. “I’m gonna go help with repairs, then. Bye, Ace. Stay safe, kick ass, take names,” I sing down the mic.

“Yeah yeah, get lost,” Ace laughs.

I laugh back. “You got it, love you bye!” And I hang up again. “Alright! I can hit nails, point me in a direction!” I cheer, running at the ship and pumping my arms.

_____

I stare up at the finished product of our hard work. “Will anybody be mad if I make a cock joke?” I ask, dead serious.

“Yes,” comes the chorus from everyone.

I close my eyes and nod my head. “Alright.”

The chicken edition of the Going Merry is… Oh she’s a sight. I don’t have the words to explain her without making the aforementioned cock joke.

“That idiot!” Nami suddenly screams. “He’s forty minutes late! That little—” she continues to complain and scream while the rest of us just kinda chill.

“Nami,” I call over. She turns her ire filled gaze at me. “I forgot to give you this. Just in case you feel like making a call later,” I say, flicking a scrap of paper at her.

She blinks rapidly down at the number scrawled across the paper. “Is this…” she gawks.

I snicker. “The number for the Alabastan library Transponder? Yeah. Juuuust in case,” I sing.

Her face goes pink and she tucks it securely into her pocket. “This doesn't mean I’m not mad about how late he is,” she grumbles.

“Hey Zoro, 9,000 berri Luffy was done hours ago and is just hunting beetles or some shit,” I snicker, elbowing the green haired menace.

He shoots me a glare. “He better not be, if he wants to make it into the sky.”

“HEY!” Luffy’s voice suddenly hollers from the treeline.

“Oh thank god.” Nami mutters.

“I DID IT!” Luffy yells, getting closer and waving a single arm.

“Luffy we gotta set sail! Like *now!”* Nami shouts back.

“LOOK AT THIS! IT’S A HERCULES!” he cheers, waving the beetle back and forth.

“WHAT WERE YOU DOING?!” we all scream at him in unison.

“Your debt is up to 87,000 berri, by the way,” I mention to Zoro, whose face goes white so fast it makes Chopper shriek.

“Woah! Merry’s a chicken! I BET SHE CAN FLY!” Luffy yells, running up and shoving the beetle in my face while I transfer his hat back to him.

“Right?!” Usopp cheers.

“Well it makes me nervous…” Nami mutters.

“A pigeon could fly better than a chicken,” Zoro muses.

“Yeah, you’d know,” I snicker. He slaps me upside the head. “Alright! Everybody on board, we’re pulling out!” I call.

“Aye!” everyone choruses, making for the ladder. Ironically, chicken Merry is easier to board than regular Merry. Mostly because when I trip at the top of the ladder I’m able to catch one of the wings.

“Hurry up, Luffy!” Usopp hollers over the rail.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” he shouts back, running for the ship at top speed.

“Mountain Monkey Allied Force!” Cricket screams. “Don’t mess up! No matter what happens, give it your all for these guys!”

Luffy hops over the rail. “Alright! Let’s go!”

“Onwards and upwards!” I cheer.

“Hey, boy! This is where we say goodbye!” Cricket calls from below. “Let me tell you something I’m certain of. No one has ever proved that El Dorado or Skypiea *doesn’t* exist! People will laugh and say they're silly jokes. Hah! Let them laugh!” Cricket’s grin near matches the glowing smile on Luffy’s face. “That’s what makes it a great adventure!” He gives a mirthful laugh. “Thanks for getting my gold back. Don’t fall out of the sky now.”

Luffy laughs. “Bye mister!”

“Thanks for everything, Cricket!” Nami calls.

“I’m sure you’ll find El Dorado someday!” Usopp cheers.

“Don’t dive so recklessly!” Chopper demands.

“Mind your own business!” Cricket yells back.

“We’ll send you a gift from the sky! You just wait and listen!” I holler with a big smile.

Cricket laughs. “I’ll hold you to that!”

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Three hours later, and the problems start. I’ve been keeping an eye on the horizon via spyglass for the past half hour when I see it. “Either there’s a hoard of bats big enough to block out the sun ahead, or the fucking cloud is early!” I shout to the group.

“WHAT?! THAT’S WAY TOO EARLY!” Shoujou shouts.

“Can we still make it?!” Masira yells over to him.

Shoujou starts yelling commands to his crew and I turn to mine. “Is absolutely everything strapped down?” I ask. I’m met with nods. “Good. Would anyone feel better with a safety line? We can tie you to the rails or something,” I offer.

Usopp, Chopper, and Nami all look tempted to take the offer. Luffy is already wound around the mainmast several times.

“Giant current discovered, twelve o’clock!” one of Shoujou’s men calls from the water.

“Giant creature detected, nine o’clock! Possibly a sea monster!” yells another.

“Wave detected, ten o’clock, coming against the direction of the current! Possibly a giant whirlpool!” another one shouts up.

“That’s it! Turn the prow to ten o’clock, that’s the sign of a Knock-Up Stream! Head for the whirlpool!” Masira orders.

The ship jerks as the waves suddenly get a whole lot rougher. I bark a laugh into the onslaught of sea water, wrapping an arm tight around the railings. “Can we do it?!” Luffy hollers up.

“Aye, we’re gonna make it!” Masira yells as two clamp things shoot down and attach themselves to the ship with a clank. “We’ll tow you to the whirlpool!”

“Then what?!” Nami shouts.

“Sail into the current! You should be fine if you can make it to the centre of the whirlpool!” he responds.

We all turn to the giant fucking whirlpool in various states of horror. “No one said anything about this!” Nami cries.

“Don’t worry Nami! I’ll protect you, Robin and Ed!” Sanji yells.

“I’ve never seen such an enormous maelstrom,” Robin observes.

“I WANNA GO BACK! LET’S GO BACK!” Usopp wails.

“Sorry Usopp, too late now. There’s no turning back,” Zoro grunts.

“This is nostalgic! At least we aren’t in a barrel this time, eh Captain?!” I cackle, knocking my shoulder into Luffy’s.

He laughs loudly. “Yeah! Sky island here we come!”

A giant eel looking Sea King briefly surfaces in the middle of the whirlpool before it gets sucked under. We stare at it in horrified silence for a second. “Well that’s fuckin ominous,” I deadpan.

“Alright you’re on your own from now on! Good luck!” Shoujou and Masira call from where their ships have retreated.

“Ok! Thanks for everything!” Luffy calls back.

“Yeah, we got this! Clear out so your ships don’t capsize!” I holler over.

“I’M SORRY YOU DIDN’T FIND YOUR BROOCH! YOU’RE SUCH NICE PEOPLE!” Masira wails. Aw, I almost feel bad that it was a lie now.

“WAIT DON’T LEAVE! I WANNA STOP THIS IS HORRIBLE AND I’M SCARED!” Usopp shrieks.

Night suddenly falls as we’re sucked further toward the whirlpool. I ignore all the screams of terror and begs for mercy from my friends to appreciate the fucking insanity of what I’m living through.

“If you ignore how terrifying this is, it’s fucking awesome!” I laugh.

Luffy grabs onto my hand with a hoot. “This is so cool!” He’s practically vibrating in excitement. It’s adorable.

The ship goes flying over the edge of the whirlpool. “OHMYGODWE’RE *FALLING—”* Usopp’s scream is cut off as we splash harmlessly into the calm sea.

“Huh? What happened? It’s gone?” Sanji asks, looking around confused.

“Hold onto your hats, ladies and germs,” I laugh. “This baby is winding up to rock us!”

“HOLD IT!” that terribly familiar voice cuts across the water. Every ounce of warmth flees my body in seconds. Luffy goes still beside me as we look to where the call originated.

The stupid fucking raft ship with Blackbeard’s stupid fucking Jolly Roger on its stupid fucking sail is headed right for us.

“Zehahaha! We caught up with you, Strawhat Luffy!” Blackbeard cackles. “We’re gonna take that hundred million berri head of yours! Give up!”

Luffy blinks. “Did you say my head’s worth a hundred million berri?” he yells back.

“You mean you don’t know?!” Blackbeard shouts. “You have a bounty of a hundred million! Pirate Hunter Zoro is worth sixty million, and that Domino character is worth seventy million!”

My jaw drops and my eyes pop out of their sockets. “SEVENTY MILLION?! THAT’S WAY TOO FUCKING MUCH!” I scream.

The crew's chatter around me is cut off by the sea swelling under us. The rumbling of the current is loud and oppressive.

Blackbeard’s laugh still rings through the sound. His ship is hundreds of feet away, but I see everything crystal clear. The middle of his forehead is an appetizing target.

For a second my self control fails.

The seastone bullet is heavy in my pocket, heavy in my hand, then heavy in the barrel of my gun. Through the roar of water and wind I point it at Blackbeard. For a moment I let all of the anger, grief, fury — all of it — spread across my face.

I shoot.

Something gives in my gun. But my shot flies true.

Blackbeard doesn't flinch, doesn't dodge, doesn't move a single muscle. He just stares at me transfixed as a line of red cuts across his cheek and obliterates half of his ear.

We stare for what feels like an eternity. Then a slow deranged smile claws its way out of his toothy mouth. I couldn't hear him over the thrum of the water if I tried, but his words reach me all the same.

What have you seen?

The bottom of my stomach drops out, my anger going with it. Pure unadulterated terror taking its place.

He yells something else, but the gurgling of the water has gotten too loud. Coin something.

"Did he just say something about coin elk?" Chopper asks behind me.

"Nah, he said coins milk," Sanji replies.

"I didn't hear an m though?" Chopper mumbles.

My stomach is a lead pit. Terror has its grip on my throat and is not letting go.

“Everybody grab onto something secure or go below!” Sanji shouts.

“THE SEA’S GONNA BLOW!” sobs Usopp.

I can’t make myself move. My joints are frozen in the position I fired in. I can barely fucking *breath, how the shit am I supposed to hold on to anything—*

“Woah…” Luffy murmurs.

The current explodes.

Chapter End Notes

Ed's strength is still what some may call pathetic, but I call a plot device. That is to say, they vacillate wildly between being an absolute badass and being weaker than a shrimp. That's my babygirl!!!

There's like, a lot to unpack in here and we ain't got time for all that.

Also unrelated, but I absolutely love watching you guys speculate in the comments. Makes my guts feel all fuzzy and warm <3

Chapter 47: Chapter Forty Seven: This Air Is Getting So Thin

Chapter Summary

Honey Whiskey - Nothing but Thieves

All I've got is that when I can finally see straight again, I'm on the ground on my hands and knees and my crew have collapsed around me. Sanji is hacking up his crusty ass smoker lungs and I think Usopp may have died from oxygen deprivation.

Chapter Notes

Yeehaw baybie we're in it now! This arc is so fun and it only gets more fucked as it goes on xoxo

Also Ed is lowkey living their Moana dreams and I love that for them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I nearly fly off the damn ship, if not for Zoro's hand latching onto my wrist and jerking me back. He tucks me under his chin and hunches the pair of us to the ground. My fingers are clenched tight in his shirt.

"I don't know what the fuck just happed, and I'm not gonna ask! Can you hold your shit together for a few minutes?" Zoro asks in a yell above the whistle of wind.

"Uh — I'll get back to you on that!" I shout back, voice shaking as much as my hands.

Oh my god what did I do? Oh sweet mercy I just painted a target on my back a mile wide. What the hell does this jackass know?! How the hell did he guess — AAAAUUGHH WHY COULDN'T THIS BE LESS COMPLICATED?! And what the fuck was that last thing he yelled?!

All of the screaming around me just kind of fades into white noise. I'm shoved into another pair of arms when Zoro runs off, I don't bother checking who it is.

Fuck fuck fuck ***fuck fuck FUCK—***

That was probably a mistake.

"Detective Domino, I do suggest you pay attention," Robin says into my ear, abnormally calm given the situation we're in. I realize it's her arms I'm currently anchored in, and we both go sliding down the deck and come to a rest on the wall of the cabin as we tilt straight upward.

I look up just as that giant Sea King from earlier goes flying down past our ship. Everyone's yells are still kind of blending together, it's a miracle I was even able to hear Robin's level voice over the cacophony. More chunks of ship falls past us.

"HOIST THE SAIL!" Nami's voice cuts through the noise like a warm knife in butter. "This is a current! It's not just a wall of water, we can sail on it like we would the sea!" Her smile is wet from the blasts of water, but so wide it makes my cheeks hurt just looking at it. "If it's wind and sea, it can be navigated! And who's the ship's navigator?!"

"YOU ARE, NAMI!" we all shout together, coordinated in our trust even in the chaos.

"We'll catch the wind at starboard and sail to port! Then we'll let the ship follow the current!" she yells. The crew burst into action. Someone throws me a rope that I tie to something or other. I never actually bothered to learn the names of any of the sailing shit I've been doing…

"The ship's leaving the water!" Chopper shrieks from across the deck, the g-force of our ship not enough to keep him anchored to the floor.

“WE’RE FALLING NAMI DO SOMETHING—” Usopp sobs, holding onto the rails for dear life.

“No, we’re gonna make it!” Nami declares.

The ship leaves the water. We fucking *fly up the giant pillar of water.*

“My life is so goddamn ridiculous now…” I sigh.

“Awesome! We’re flying!” Luffy cackles.

“No kidding?!” Usopp wheezes.

“We did it…” Nami says with a breathless laugh.

“Well whaddya know?” Zoro chuckles.

“Nami, you’re incredible and I love you!” Sanji cries.

“With this wind and current we can make it all the way to the top!” Nami announces.

“Nami, are we there yet? Are we to Skypiea?” Luffy asks, his huge grin infectious.

“If it exists, it’s above those clouds!” she yells, pointing straight ahead.

“Ahhh! I wonder what’s up there!” Luffy laughs. “Let’s head right for the Emperor Cloud!”

We all chorus a “YEAH!” in return.

I stare out over the edge of the ship and hum Frigate that Flies from that Tinkerbell pirate movie under my breath. “You know I almost went to school for aviation?” I mention to Zoro as he slides onto the cabin beside me.

He raises an eyebrow. “A clown, a mermaid, what *didn’t* you want to be? And why didn’t you?”

I snicker. “I realized how much math and psychics I would need to know and said no fucking thank you.”

He sighs, exasperated. “Yeah that sounds about right.”

I take a deep breath and find it not as fulfilling as usual. “Ah, guys? Something to take into account, we’re at a bonkers elevation. So um, it’s gonna be hard to breathe. Maybe… don’t try to fight anything until we’ve assimilated.”

“Yeah,” Luffy wheezes from the figurehead, “I noticed.”

We break through the top of the Emperor Cloud, the wings of chicken Merry being left behind in a crack of wood. Things get a little… blurry at that point. I think I almost pass out? I don’t know.

All I’ve got is that when I can finally see straight again, I’m on the ground on my hands and knees and my crew have collapsed around me. Sanji is hacking up his crusty ass smoker lungs and I think Usopp may have died from oxygen deprivation.

“Is everyone alive?” I call around a heaving breath. There’s a few groans and another round of coughs from Sanji. Yeesh, we should probably ween him off the cigarettes…

“Hey guys! Look where we are!” Luffy says breathlessly, somehow the most mobile of us.

I wipe the residual water from my face and stand on wobbly feet. My limbs feel sluggish and heavy, but I make my way to Luffy regardless. I feel my eyes widen as I take in the landscape. Everything as far as the eye can see is pure white cloud.

“Woah…” I breathe. As always, seeing it on paper or on a screen couldn’t do it justice. It’s like we’re inside the cloud itself, light breaks in from all above us in a halo that diffuses like fallen pollen. It almost feels like something you can physically touch. “Beautiful,” I murmur.

“We're above the… We’re sailing on clouds!” Nami gasps, stumbling up to the front of the ship beside me and Luffy.

“Of course we are! Clouds float, boats float, same thing!” Luffy says matter of factly.

“No it’s not!” Sanji, Zoro and Chopper all wheeze.

“Hey! Usopp’s not breathing!” Chopper suddenly shrieks.

“What?! Give him mouth to mouth!” Luffy yells, bounding across the ship to them.

“Good idea! I’ll give it to Nami!” Sanji cries.

“Idiot…” Zoro grumbles.

“This must be the… sky ocean..?” Nami says uncertainly. “But the Log Pose is still pointing up.”

“We must only be in the middle layer of the Emperor Cloud,” Robin infers.

Usopp jumps up on the rail and unhooks the straps of his overalls. “First course of action! Captain Usopp is going for a swim!” he announces.

“Yeah! Do it!” Luffy and Chopper cheer.

“Hey, be careful! We don’t know anything about this ocean!” Sanji warns.

I scrabble across the deck toward him. “Wait, Usopp, don't jump down without a rope or something—” My foot catches on a loose floorboard. I trip and go slamming face first into Usopp. We both fall over the rail with matching screams. “This ocean doesn’t hAVE A BOTTOM—”

My warning cuts off as we submerge. I can’t see fuck all in the cloudy water, my grip on Usopp’s hand the only thing that feels like it’s keeping me on this plane.

I very quickly lose grasp of which direction is up. Usopp and me exchange panicked eyes. He whips his head around for a second before blowing a bubble of air. It floats up to our left and we both turn that direction.

Then Luffy’s crazy ass plummets into the water in front of us. My mouth drops open and my air floods out. I jerk Usopp forward in the water to grab Luffy with my other hand, resisting the urge to start screaming profanities underwater.

An arm growing out of an arm growing out of an arm suddenly drops in front of us, one of Robin’s blue eyes is in the palm looking right at us. I try to swing Usopp towards it. It grabs onto his bicep, and then we’re being pulled up through the water in a monkey chain.

We burst through the surface and back onto the ship just as people start screaming. “THAT’S NOT USOPP OR ED!”

I crane my neck around and start screaming too. A giant goddamn sky… octopus? Squid? I never learned the difference- it doesn't matter. Point is it's big, it's scary and it's coming rigHT AT US OH GOD—

Zoro shoots past us and slices the thing to bits. Well, he slices into it and it explodes like a balloon, but same outcome. We're dragged back onto the deck by Robin's extra limbs, and Sanji jumps in front of us to kick another slightly smaller creature thing.

"This is already going great you guys!" I wheeze into the deck, smacking Luffy on the back to make him spit out the cloud water he obviously swallowed. "What on god's green earth made you think jumping in after us was a good idea?"

Luffy gives me a big smile. "It looked fun! And you said it had no bottom, I didn't want you guys to fall through!"

I heave a sigh despite the smile that takes over my face. "You leave those kinda rescues to the people who can *swim,* darling." He just snickers, the shit.

Usopp suddenly shrieks beside us while flopping around. "Can you calm down?!" Sanji yells.

"There's something in my pants!" Usopp yelps, tossing some kinda flat fish thing onto the deck and collapsing. "Sky island scary. Sky island scary."

One cooked skyfish later, I am enjoying some of the best seafood ever. "Why does it taste so good?" I groan, shoving another forkful into my mouth with a foot firmly planted on Luffy's back to keep him away.

"Hey, a ship!" Chopper announces from the other side of the ship. I furrow my brow. There shouldn't be another ship up here, should there? I don't fucking remember, doesn't Wyper come and attack us here? "It's a ship… and… a person..?" He suddenly goes stock still.

"Chopper..?" I call over, worried.

“It…” he squeaks out. Then he screams and drops the binoculars he was using.

I drop my plate to Luffy (who immediately inhales the thing) so I can rush over to Chopper. I pop the button on my spyglass case and flick it open in one fluid motion, eye trained on the approaching masked figure.

“Guerrilla coming in hot on our starboard!” I announce, reaching back for my gun. Then I freeze.

“There’s a gorilla?!” Luffy shouts excitedly.

“Not that kind of gorilla,” Sanji corrects.

“FUCK!” I shout.

Everyone turns to me. “What?!” Nami asks, sounding completely panicked.

“My goddamn gun broke!” I wail, falling to my knees and banging my fist on the deck.

“So? Just leave the gorilla to us!” Luffy shouts, putting up his dukes.

“The air is too thin for you to fight! Your body still needs to adjust!” I shout back, trying to shake my pistol and see if there’s something my pea brain can fix about it.

“Too late for that to matter!” Sanji yells from the front of the ship.

I turn just in time to get an eyeful of of Wyper, donning his crazy bull mask and shield with his fucking bazooka under one arm, launch himself up onto the bow of the ship. “I’m going to get rid of you,” he announces.

The boys, to put it nicely, get obliterated. Wyper wipes the damn floor with them. “What the hell?!” Nami screams, hitting the deck as Wyper jumps up, does a flip mid air, and turns his bazooka back on us.

“Enough!” a voice from on high shouts. We watch as a… bird… swoops into view and a man in plate mail and a cape leaps off him to jab at Wyper with his large lance. As Wyper goes crashing into the cloud sea, Gan Fall lands on the rails of our ship.

“Who’s this guy?!” Nami shrieks.

Gan Fall straightens up and turns to us as the bird thing lands behind him. “I am the Sky Knight!” He takes a glance back out to the place Wyper fell. “Seems he’s gone.”

“What the heck?! Who was that guy? And why did low oxygen make you guys *that pathetic?!”* Nami hollers.

Aw shit, I should have tried to talk to Wyper. I probably could have gotten us in contact with the Shandorians and planned some kinda assault on Eneru. Oh well. Maybe that’s something I can do when we get to the Upper Yard…

“Don’t tell me you rode the Knock-Up Stream? So there are still people brave enough to ride that thing!” I tune back in as Nami starts crying in response to Gan Fall’s words.

“What’s the big deal? We made it fine,” Luffy groans as Nami shakes him back and forth.

“We almost died! We should have gotten more information! Ed, did you know about this?!” she demands.

I shrug. “Not really, no. To be honest, I kinda liked riding the current. It was fun. And all of us survived! Just think; in the other case scenario all of us would have died together, wouldn’t that have been nice?” I say cheerfully.

Nami cries into her hands.

“There aren’t many who possess that kind of courage, especially these days. You’re all worthy sea dogs,” Gan Fall announces.

“It was all me actually. When everyone had given up it was I, Captain Usopp, who stepped up and led us to victory—” Usopp gets cut off by Nami smacking her hand over his mouth.

Gan Fall tosses something onto the deck from his perch on the rail. “Here’s one whistle. Blow it once and I will come down to save you from the heavens! By all rights you should be paying me five million extols for that, but you may have this one for free in honour of your courage.”

“Wait! You didn’t tell us your name!” Nami calls as Gan Fall stands up on the rail.

“I am Gan Fall the Sky Knight!” he proclaims. “And this is Pierre, my partner! Pierre is a bird with the power of the Horse Horse Fruit. He can transform into a winged horse!” The… bird… from earlier starts to change before our eyes. Nami makes a delighted gasp before we see the form Pierre takes. “A pegasus!” Gan Fall says proudly. Nami’s face falls so fast it probably reaches sea level in seconds. “Good luck, brave ones!” Gan Fall yells as he flies off on Pierre’s back.

We stare after him for a second. “Well that guy was useless. You guys wanna sail towards that waterfall thing?” I ask, pointing it out.

Nami heaves a sigh. “Fine, may as well.”

I snatch the whistle up from the ground and pass it to Chopper. “You hold onto this, yeah? Keep it safe,” I command with a smile.

His little face lights up. “I will! I’ll be super careful with it!”

“Whaaaat?! Why can’t I have it?!” Luffy whines.

“Because I like Chopper and I want Chopper to hang onto it,” I announce.

Luffy deflates. “Fine…”

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“I think this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” I sigh, slumping down into a fucking cloud that feel like being hugged by a marshmallow if a marshmallow was a big dude who gives really good hugs. So like Baymax or something. “Can we *please* bring some of this with us?” I beg, staring down at Nami who’s still in the ship.

She sighs. “If you find us a way past and it doesn’t cost anything, sure.”

I whoop and slide down the cloud back to the ship, leaving Usopp and Luffy behind. “Hell yes! There’s a gate up ahead!”

After slowly maneuvering through the cloud banks the gate comes into view. “So… Should we be worried that it’s called Heaven’s Gate?” Sanji asks slowly.

“It’s a terrible omen. We’re all going to die,” Usopp whimpers.

“It’s more likely that we’re already dead,” Zoro snickers, to which Sanji agrees and Chopper starts screaming.

“Heaven? I can’t wait! I’m finally going to heaven!” Luffy cheers.

“Uh — I don’t know if I’m gonna be allowed in there,” I mumble.

“Well they can’t keep out all of us,” Nami states, smacking a hand into my shoulder.

As we sail into the gate, a door on the side of one of the banks swings open and that weird old lady strolls out. As she starts taking pictures of us I strike a pose. “Get my good side!” I holler over.

“Are you tourists or have you come to make war?” she calls back. “It doesn’t really matter. If you want to go to the upper stratum, you’ll have to pay the entrance fee of one billion extols per person. That’s the law.”

“An angel! Is that what an angel looks like? She’s a pruney little angel!” Luffy gasps.

“How much is one billion extols?” Usopp mumbles.

“Uh, what if we don’t have any money?” Nami asks.

“You may pass,” the old lady, Amazon I think? says back. “But… that choice is entirely up to you. I’m neither a guardian or a gatekeeper. I’m simply asking what you wish to do.” Oh wow she’s both creepy *and* haughty. That’s a hard combination to pull off.

“Then we’re going through to the sky island!” Luffy announces.

“I see. Eight of you, then?” she ponders.

Luffy tilts his head. “Yeah..? But how do we get up?”

Luffy’s question is answered as two giant lobster claws grapple onto the sides of the ship and we take off down the cloud river/waterfall thing. We all start screaming of course.

“THERE’S NO WAY THIS IS NATURAL!” Usopp shrieks as the river thing disconnects from the surroundings like a belt leading into the sky. We shoot past the sign proclaiming ‘Godland Skypiea’ and burst through the hole in the top onto the White White Sea.

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I’m off like a shot as soon as we’re close enough to shore. My feet splash through the cloud-like water and across the cloud-watery cloud-like sand onto the cloud-like beach, where I promptly face plant into the cloud-like ground.

“That didn’t even hurt!” I exclaim, absolutely delighted despite the cloud-sand clinging to my lips. “It’s like a beach of bean bag filling!”

Luffy crashes into the ground beside me, throwing up piles of the weird sand. “This is *awesome!”*

I roll onto my back and stare up at the sky. Then I turn to Luffy with a huge smile. “You think they have cloud shells in here?”

His whole face lights up, then I’m sprayed with a barrage of cloud-sand as he starts digging up the beach. I roll away from him laughing. I come to a stop eye to eye with what almost looks like a cloudy crayfish. I gently pluck it from the sand and it pinches its little claw things in the air.

“Ed! I got you a flower!” Sanji says excitedly, trotting up and tucking a poofy flower behind my ear. When did he change into that goofy outfit? Whatever. I give him an eye searing smile and present him with my crayfish thing. He blinks and takes it with a hysterical giggle, dancing away towards Nami. “Nami! I got you a flower too!”

“OW! Luffy! Ed, Luffy dropped a really heavy nut on me! Make him apologize!” Usopp screeches from across the way.

“It’s not my fault you didn’t catch it!” Luffy yells back.

“If you want an apology, get it from him yourself!” I holler, not bothering to turn away from where I’m scanning the horizon.

The air suddenly fills with music. The soft but insistent tone of a harp sings across the beach from a cloudy hill.

“Is that a person?” Zoro asks.

“Is it another guerilla?!” Usopp cries.

“The whistle! Get the whistle!” Chopper screams.

“It’s an angel!” Sanji proclaims.

It’s an angel. Well, It’s Conis. She’s basically an angel, so it works. She looks down at us with a soft smile and strums another note on her harp. “Heso!” she calls down. Then she’s slinging her harp across her back and descending the hill towards us.

“Heso! Sorry, we just got here. We’re Blue Sea people,” I call back, only slightly taken off guard.

That was Laura Bailey. I fucking hate whoever cast these people, if only for being very good at their job.

She blinks and makes a sound of understanding. “Ah, I see! I’m Conis. Welcome to Angel Beach, in Skypiea.” A small white fox trots past me and jumps up on her. Wow, her hair things are weird. How do those even work?

Luffy waddles up to my side with two of those big nut things he dropped on Usopp under each arm. “Do you live here?”

She hums. “Yes, I do. Do you like conash?” she takes one of the nut things from his hand and cuts a hole in the top with a knife she pulls from somewhere, then she drops a straw in the top and passes it back.

Luffy takes a long sip and his jaw drops. “This is great!”

Usopp tries to snatch it from his hands with little success. “Really?! Lemme try!”

Conis laughs. “If you’re in trouble I’d be happy to help you.”

“Woah, a look like that could melt a man’s heart — OUCH!” Sanji’s fawning is cut off by Nami yankinging him backwards by the ear.

“We have lots of questions, this is all very strange to us,” she says politely.

“Well I’d be happy to answer them!” Conis says back cheerfully.

“Hey, there’s something coming in from the water!” Zoro calls over. We all turn and watch as Conis’s father comes racing in hot on a waver.

“It’s a slug!” Luffy announces.

“Oh, that’s my father. Heso, father!” Conis shouts as the man approaches.

“Conis, Heso!” he replies. “Pardon me, I’m coming ashore!” By ashore I assume he meant crash landing in the sand. “Is anyone hurt?” he croaks from the ground.

“You were the one who crashed!” Zoro snaps.

“Is that a waver like the one we have?” Nami asks, peering at the contraption with a spark in her eye.

I nod. “Yes ma’am. You could probably ask this guy if he could fix ours up.”

“Are these friends of yours, Conis?” Conis’s dad, I can’t remember his name, asks, righting his waver and getting to his feet.

“Yes, father, I just met them. They’re from the Blue Sea,” she responds, her hair things bobbing as she tilts her head and smiles.

“I see. Then they must feel rather lost right now, hm?” Conis’s dad chuckles.

“Huh? We’re not lost,” Usopp blurts, waving his hands and sweating.

“Pardon me, I should have introduced myself. I am Pagaya.”

Oh that’s his name. “Nice to meet you,” we all chorus.

“Oh this is perfect, I was just out fishing the finest catch in the White White Sea. A sky lobster! Won’t you come to our house and enjoy the bounty of the sky with us?” Pagaya asks, holding up his catch.

“Really?! Sure we’ll come!” Luffy shouts, jumping and drooling.

“You had me at lobster!” I holler, jumping right along with him.

“First, do you think you could explain to me how this thing works? With the lack of sails, that is,” Nami asks, kneeling beside Pagaya’s waver.

“Oh, you must not know what a dial is,” Conis surmises.

“Dial?” Usopp mumbles.

_____

The second Luffy tries to step onto the waver I’m hauling him away by the scruff of his neck. “No way in hell. Er — Heaven. Your stupid ass would fall and drown,” I declare.

Luffy whines as Pagaya gasps into his hands. “Oh, I hadn’t even thought of it! Wavers are very hard to control, it’s a bad idea to let any of you try it by yourselves.”

“I’ve been learning since I was a child, and I’ve still only recently learned how to control it!” Conis adds.

I elbow Zoro in the ribs. “Bet you 10,000 berri our resident weather witch will be a wiz at it immediately.”

He scoffs. “Angel girl just said it took her years to figure it out. No way.”

“Hey!” comes Nami’s voice from the water. “This is wonderful!”

Zoro’s head drops into his hands in shame while the rest of us start cheering. “What?! She’s amazing! I can’t believe my eyes!” Pagaya gasps.

“Go Nami go!” I cheer, arm locked with Sanji as he proclaims his love.

“Get off now! We’re going to eat!” Luffy hollers, looking mildly jealous that she gets to ride it.

“You guys go on ahead! Can I ride it a little longer, mister?” Nami calls back.

“Of course, but please be careful!” Pagaya responds.

“What he said! Be careful, you don’t know the dangers of this place yet!” I yell as she moves further out. A waving hand is her only response.

“Well then, let's go,” Conis says, turning towards a large staircase in the clouds.

As we start to go, something like a static shock travels up my spine. It’s almost like friction dancing across my skin.

I pause in following the others. My gaze turns skyward.

Enjoy watching while you can, false god.

“Ed! Hurry up! SKY LOBSTER!” Luffy shouts from ahead.

I snap back into focus and run after them. “Yeah! Sky lobster!”

Chapter End Notes

Hehehe. I'm going to do something so terrible.

Dude I have to write a creative piece for one of my classes and when I tell you I am THIS CLOSE to just writing fanfiction—
I mean I won't, but know I could.

Chapter 48: Chapter Forty Eight: Take It In But Don’t Look Down

Chapter Summary

Top Of The World - Imagine Dragons

I take a spare moment to pull my gun back out now that we aren’t in such dire straits. I… have no goddamn clue what is wrong with it or how to fix it. I don’t even know where to *start.*

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you in part by my controversial takes on godhood and the nature of the divine yeehaw.

I missed BOTH OF MY BUSSES YESTERDAY. BOTH OF THEM. I was very late to class and I'm still mad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Usopp is an idiot!” Luffy announces into the tone dial.

“Heh?! What did I do?!” Usopp cries.

Conis giggles at their antics. “Now press the apex of the shell.”

“What an apex?” Luffy asks, turning the shell upside down.

“The top pointy part,” Usopp points out.

“Usopp is an idiot!” Luffy’s voice announces out of the dial.

“Heh?! What did I do?!” Usopp’s voice cries. Conis’s giggle sounds out of it next.

“Woah! This shell made fun of Usopp!” Luffy yells. I burst out laughing.

“So this is a dial?” Zoro asks.

Conis nods. “Yes, they’re a type of shellfish that live in the White White Sea. This one specifically is called a tone dial, we mostly use them to record music.”

Usopp hums, poking the shell again and making a face when it makes fun of him. Then he turns to me. “You think they have music from where you’re from recorded?” Usopp muses.

I shake my head. “No way. If the music from where I’m from made it’s way up here I’d be fucking amazed.”

“Bet on it,” Zoro suddenly says from the couch. I turn to him with a raised eyebrow. “What was your price earlier? 10,000 berri? Bet on it.”

I stare at him for a long moment before snorting. “Ok you fucking idiot. Easy money.” I turn and tilt my head at Conis. “On another note, there’s different kinds of dials, right? I can’t imagine a song makes the waver move.”

Conis giggles again. “Very astute. The wavers are equipped with breath dials that propel them. dials are an integral part of Skypiea, we couldn’t live up here without them. We have light dials in our lamps, heat dials in the fireplace and kitchen, the list goes on,” she explains.

I whistle low and elbow Usopp. “Wowie. We should try and get as many dials as we can before we depart, imagine all the cool shit you could do with them.”

“We probably have a few extra lying around, you’re free to take them at your leisure,” Conis offers.

There’s some yelling and banging noises from the kitchen that we all ignore.

I take a spare moment to pull my gun back out now that we aren’t in such dire straits. I… have no goddamn clue what is wrong with it or how to fix it. I don’t even know where to *start.*

“You want me to take a look at it?” Usopp offers.

I pass it over. “Yeah sure. Do you have any experience with fixing guns?”

He pauses looking down the barrel. “Uh. No.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Alright.”

Sanji and Pagaya burst out of the kitchen in a flurry of dishes. The smells are fucking — AH. They’re good. And everything looks good. And I just love lobster so much, and I will be thankful that we made it up here until the day I die (again) because the lobster is so goddamn *fluffy—*

Suffice to say, it’s *good* good. And it only takes me almost stabbing my fork clean through Luffy’s palm for him to keep his damn mitts off my food.

“Where’d Nami go?” Sanji asks, forgoing getting himself a plate to peer out the balcony.

“Probably still out on the waver,” Zoro answers around his fork.

“I don’t see her,” Sanji mutters back.

“She just went out a little further, let her be,” Zoro grumbles, stabbing his fork into a slice of some kinda sky fish.

“I hope she’s alright…” Conis mumbles to her father, concern colouring her tone.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Conis,” he replies.

“Wha? What’s wrong?” Luffy asks around another mouthful of lobster.

“There’s one place in Skypiea you must never go no matter what. It borders our island so it’s reachable by waver…” Conis trails off.

“A place you can’t go? Why?” Usopp asks.

“It’s the Upper Yard, the domain of God,” Conis says solemnly.

Luffy instantly perks up. “A God?! And a place nobody’s allowed to go?!”

Conis nods emphatically. “Yes, this is Godland, the realm of the omnipotent God Eneru.”

It takes less than a second for Luffy to lose the fight against his impulses.

“Oh no you don’t, listen to the lady, Luffy! Do you hear what she’s saying?! You must *never go there!* Do you understand?!” Usopp screeches, shaking Luffy by the shirt.

A blissful smile stretches across his face regardless. “A place I can’t go? There’s a place I absolutely cannot go, huh?” he snickers, absentmindedly sticking more food in his mouth. I roll my eyes. Predictable nutcase.

“Ed! Talk some sense into him!” Usopp begs.

I smirk and shrug. “The way I see it, he hasn’t done anything yet. And you know me, I’m a spineless prick, but begging him to change his mind is beneath me,” I say sarcastically. Zoro chokes on his food in poor disguise of a laugh.

“If he’s a God, won’t he forgive us? Gods are kind, right?” Luffy says flippantly.

“I’m afraid God would most certainly destroy you,” Conis corrects.

“Ah, I see. Oh well, it doesn't matter,” Luffy shrugs. “Ok! Let’s go get Nami! After I eat this…”

“Hey! While you’re sitting here stuffing your face, Nami could be in serious trouble!” Sanji whines. “Just leave it, we’ll be coming right back!”

“But you don’t know if that’s the way she went! Please be extremely careful, you mustn’t incur God Eneru’s wrath!” Conis pleads.

I wave my hand at her. “You don’t have to worry about that, our mere existence is usually enough to piss gods off, so if yours hasn't smote us yet we’ll be fine for at least a little while.” I clean off my plate with a final scoop. “By the way, we’ve got an old defunct waver on our ship, you know anybody who would be up to fix it?”

Conis and Pagaya both blink. “I'd be happy to. If it can be fixed, I would have no problem making repairs,” Pagaya offers.

Conis nods along. “Father is a dial engineer, so if anybody can do it he can.”

_____

Usopp hands me back my gun once we’re on the ship. “Sorry, Ed. I’m no gun tech, I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with it,” he apologises, a frustrated furrow to his eyebrows.

I wave him off and tuck it back into its holster. “It’s fine, I wasn’t really expecting you to. I’ll just improvise for the time being. How’s this; once we get back down to the Blue Sea we can call up Genzo and see if he can talk you through fixing it?”

The frustration doesn’t budge an inch even as he nods. Something like self depreciation simmers just below the surface and I turn away from him to hide a cringe.

Yikes. His self esteem gets any lower and he’ll need diving gear, even all the way up here.

Turning away gives me a wonderful view of the beach as the White Berets, who arrived while I wasn’t looking I guess, start army crawling their way across the cloud-sand. “Can you guys hear what they’re saying from here?” I ask, craning my neck over the rail.

“Not really. I think Luffy is being arrested?” Sanji guesses.

“It seems that we’ve been labeled trespassers for not paying that entrance fee,” Robin explains, arms crossed over her chest. “They are charging us an exuberant amount as compensation to let us stay as legal tourists.”

Sanji makes a face. “What? But that gate lady said we could go through!”

I shake my head. “No, she just let us pass because it’s not her job to stop us. It’s these guys’ job to deal with collection if the people entering don’t wanna play by the rules.”

Chopper frowns up at me. “But that seems so confusing! It’s like it was meant for us to accidentally break the rules!”

I tap the top of his hat. “Probably because it was designed that way. I mean, this place is run by a God who allegedly strikes down people who disrespect him. One doesn’t keep that authority without strict regulations, and foreigners introducing opposing ideals is a threat to that. Painting them as criminals by having them commit a crime right from the get-go is actually pretty smart.”

He blinks big eyes at me. “But isn’t that… kinda mean?”

That was adorably naive.

“God isn’t kind,” I tell him. “Well, at least a majority of the ones I know of, I can think of a couple exceptions. But God isn’t your friend, he’s God.” Chopper tilts his head like he’s confused. Sanji and Usopp do the same. “I’m not explaining this very well, am I?”

Goddamn religious trauma is still coming for my ass.

Robin hums. “It seems to be going over their heads, Detective.”

“I don’t know why I bother. In any case, I highly doubt this is capital G our-father-who-art-in-heaven God. It’s either a little g god or just some dude. We’re great at dealing with dudes!” I say enthusiastically.

There’s a resounding slap as all my friends smack their hands into their faces. “Anybody else see whatever that is?” Usopp suddenly asks, pointing at an approaching plume of cloud on the cloud-water.

“It would seem our navigator has returned all on her own,” Robins states.

“Don’t argue with them!” Nami yells, coming in hot on the waver.

“But they want seventy million berries for us trespassing!” Luffy shouts back, a near whine.

“SEVENTY MILLION?!” Nami shrieks, her waver not slowing a bit as she reaches the shore like she should. The damn thing speeds up. She fully plows into the captain of the White Berets and sends him fucking flying.

“Right on,” Zoro and Usopp blurt at the same time.

There’s a lot of screaming coming from the shore. Nami is trying to drag Luffy towards the ship and it’s really not working.

“IN THE NAME OF GOD ENERU, I DECLARE YOU EXILED TO THE CLOUDS!” the captain guy screams.

“That’s… probably bad,” Usopp mutters.

“Exiled to the clouds… perhaps that explains that galleon that nearly crushed us to death,” Robin surmises.

“Great, so we’re doomed to drift on the clouds until we turn into bones or die by falling, amazing,” Usopp says sarcastically.

“What the hell makes you think we’re sticking around long enough for them to punish us?” I snort.

“ARREST THEM!” the captain bellows. Half the assembled White Berets all immediately fall into action, drawing back bows that shoot out rays of cloud that the other half of them

then jump up and start skating on.

“That’s fucking cool, I’m not gonna lie,” I decide.

Zoro and Sanji both step up onto the rails before leaping off towards the fight. Nami replaces them on deck, staring over at the fighting with her mouth drawn in a tight line. We watch Luffy stretch out in a flurry of punches and kicks like an exploding firework while the boys mop up the stragglers.

“Nami, what’s the financial situation?” Zoro calls over.

Nami’s brow furrows. “About fifty thousand berries. Plus whatever Ed has squirreled away and *won’t give up!”*

I stick my tongue out at her. “You specifically don’t get to lecture me about keeping private funds separate! I *know* you have a stash too!”

“We’re seriously that broke?” Sanji groans. “That’s regularly only enough for a couple days.”

“As your Captain I need to say this; you guys spend too much money!” Luffy announces, pointing back at us on the ship.

“Blame the two black holes that live on our ship! One of which *you are!”* Nami snaps.

The captain guy struggles to his feet behind the ground, mumbling something or other that I can’t hear from here but that my pals on the ground respond to.

“The Gods vassles in the Upper Yard will deal with you!” the captain screams, then all the White Berets are army crawling back down the beach from whence they came.

We all stare after them for a moment.

“I think our ability to piss off law enforcement everywhere we go should be studied,” I say mildly.

Usopp slams his head into the rail and groans.

_____

“So that granny tricked us?!” Nami shrieks once the group is all back on the shore and our situation is explained to her and her discovery explained in turn.

“No, like I said, it was designed to be confusing,” I groan.

“We would have just forced our way in anyways if she had tried to stop us,” Usopp says miserably.

“Shut up!” Nami snaps.

“It’s a terrible predicament,” Pagaya says, voice quiet from the distance. “Now that you’ve been branded class-2 criminals, it’s impossible for us to help you.”

“It’s fine, we’re used to being hunted,” Luffy snickers. “Nami! Why’d you have to come back? We were gonna go to the place we aren’t supposed to go to get you!” he whines.

She immediately starts jabbing him in the head. “Luffy you dumbass! What part of scary island with scary guys did you not get?! I don’t know if they’re GODS but they sure had godly strength! I’m not going back there!”

Luffy rubs his no doubt tender forehead and grimaces at her. “Then you can wait here! We’ll just go without you!”

“No! They’re gonna come after us, we have to get out of here!” Nami shrieks.

“You mean *leave?!* No way! What’s more important, your life or adventure?!” Luffy shouts, looking far past scandalized by the notion.

“My life! Followed very closely by money!” she snaps back.

“You’re such a stick in the mud, Nami!” I groan. “You can just figure out how to get us back down to sea level while we have all the fun!”

There’s a thick moment of silence.

“WAIT HOW THE FUCK DO WE GET DOWN?!” Usopp screams, clutching at his hair.

Everyone turns to Conis in sync. “There is a way down. You have to sail to the far east of the White Sea, to a place called Clouds End. I’d… advise against that route. You’d have to cross quite a vast sea,” she explains.

The group exchanges a few looks. “Well, it’s just as dangerous to stay here. Plus if we stay it’ll make trouble for you. Conis, Pagaya, thanks for everything!” Nami decides breezily, turning back towards the ship. I follow after her with Chopper and Robin both on my tail and Zoro ahead of me. “Wait, where are you guys going?” Nami calls back when she realizes Usopp, Sanji and Luffy have all started going the opposite direction.

“Getting food! You get the ship ready, we’ll be back!” Luffy cheers.

Nami grumbles, turning back forward and stalking through the ankle deep water. “That idiot! Do the words dangerous just not click in his tiny rubber head?!”

“You know how Luffy is. He doesn’t care,” Zoro grouches.

“He certainly marches to the beat of his own drum,” I snicker. Oh, I just realized, if my crazy ass manages to live until the end of Wano, people are gonna have *a lot* of questions about the jokes I’ve made. Haha, oops. Maybe I should tone down the god jokes.

…Nah.

_____

As it always does with this crew, the peace doesn’t last long.

I’m going to be candid, I don’t remember a fuck ton of detail about Skypiea. I know the broad strokes, and a couple of the little things, but a lot of the moving pieces are lost on me. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not one of those psychopaths who skipped Skypiea, I’m just fucken dumb.

So when the weird vibrating starts coming up through the floorboards, I’m a lil’ bit confused.

“Does anyone else feel that?” Chopper asks nervously.

Nami’s face pinches and she slowly leans over the rail to check. That, of course, is interrupted by a giant fucking lobster claw latching onto the deck right in front of her face. We all immediately start screaming. A second claw latches on, and then we’re being carried away from the beach at top speed.

“What the fuck?!” Nami shrieks, having fallen on her ass from shock.

“Jump overboard! There’s still time!” Zoro orders.

“What?! But what about the ship?!” Chopper cries.

“I’ll stay with it, it’s fine!” Zoro responds.

“No the fuck you won’t, you self sacrifical toad!” I snap, crouching down as we pick up more speed.

“They’ve made sure we can’t abandon the ship,” Robin pipes up. “There’s a hoard of gigantic skyfish chasing us with mouths wide open, if we jump they’ll tear us apart!”

“Can we just beat up the lobster?!” Chopper wails.

“It’s already begun, it’s probably no use,” Robin responds, a bead of sweat rolling down her face.

“Heaven's punishment. Instead of coming to us, they’re bringing us to them. Clever,” Zoro grumbles.

Nami’s face turns stark white. “We’re going to the forbidden island?!” She immediately rushes up beside me at the railing and starts screaming the names of our crewmates as they get further and further.

“Alright folks, as of right now we need to consider ourselves hostages. Luffy and the others can handle themselves, though it’s become painfully obvious we’ve been betrayed, while the rest of us figure out what it is we have to do,” I start.

“Betrayed? By who?” Nami questions.

“Pagaya and Conis abide by the laws of this land, and even though they seem like good people, fear can make them do some not so great stuff,” I explain.

Chopper blinks watery eyes up at me. “So Conis and Pagaya… really betrayed us?”

I pat him on the head. “They probably didn’t want to, but yes. Now it’s our job to stop being dead weight and take care of business while the rest of our idiots are occupied with whatever bullshit this place is going to throw at them.”

“What do you suggest? What’s our plan?” Zoro asks, folding his arms and annoyingly calm despite the goddamn lobster carrying us at high speeds.

“We don’t know enough yet for a proper plan. We know there’s an island made of dirt up here in the clouds, there's four godlike dudes on it who kill people, they want to kill *us,* and then there’s the matter of the guerillas. Let’s wait until we get to our destination to plan anything concretely,” I state.

“You can’t make a plan out of just that?” Robin asks, no condescension in her tone, just the simple curiosity of a woman trying to learn all the angles of a new person.

“I could,” I admit, “but isn’t it so much more fun if we get to have a little adventure first?” I give the rest of the crew a wicked little smile. “Besides, I need our Captain to tell me what he wants to topple first.”

———

“Anybody else a little offended we were dropped on a sacrificial altar? Not even for myself, for this God they’re sacrificing us to. We make shit sacrifices,” I grumble.

“I’m just pissed that overgrown crustacean left us here,” Zoro grouches.

“Wait, sacrifice?!” Nami shrieks.

“What’s a sacrifice?” Chopper asks, hopping up on the rail to peek around.

“Like an offering to the gods,” Nami answers, eyes darting around the jungle like the trees are gonna reach out to slap her.

“Oh… I thought it meant getting boiled alive. Like in a big soup or something,” Chopper sighs.

“That’s about right. In any case, it seems they mean to give our lives to their God,” Robin muses.

“WE’RE GONNA DIE?!” Chopper screams, flailing so hard he unbalances himself.

His little arms pinwheel for a second before he’s falling over the side of the ship and tumbling down the stairs. We all run to the edge of the ship screaming, of course, and Zoro immediately leaps down after him.

Chopper is stopped right at the base of where the stairs meet the cloud-water by a pair of Robin’s arms and we all heave a sigh of relief.

Then one of the sky sharks makes a wild attempt on him. It’s thwarted by Zoro descending on it, swords drawn, like a rabid dog.

“Oh my god there’s sharks in the sky?!” I cry. “Can we keep one?!”

Nami smacks me upside the head. “A shark is gonna eat Zoro! Is that really what you wanna focus on?!”

I scowl and rub the back of my head. “It’s *Zoro!* Besides, if his lame ass gets taken out by a *shark,* a fucking *water-sky-whatever* ***puppy*** *,* then he fucking deserves it.” We watch the still cloud-water for a long moment. “...Did the water-sky-puppy actually beat him..?” I ask slowly.

Then Zoro is bursting out of the cloud-water hollering while burying his fist in the face of the sky shark. “This sucks!” he yells up at us, trudging back onto the stairs dripping water and grabbing Chopper by the scruff of his neck as he goes.

“Where the hell did you get goggles?” I ask incredulously, squinting at him as he hops back onto the deck.

“Shut up. There’s no way I can swim to the bank from here with those fucking… things,” Zoro snaps.

Robin hums. “So we’re on a sacrificial altar in the Upper Yard, surrounded by sky sharks. Is this enough information for a plan yet, Detective? Perhaps *their* plan is to starve us.”

I push off answering her to wolf whistle as loud and as obnoxiously as I can when Zoro shucks off his wet shirt. He throws me the stink eye and I wink at him. “To be perfectly candid, this isn’t anything new. Where else would we be brought to, and how else would they keep us here? We still need more information,” I tell her.

“You’d think a god would try something flashier than starvation,” Zoro muses as Nami chucks a blue tank top at his head.

Fuck yeah, one of the best Zoro fits. Will he be mad if I only stare at his shoulders and chest the rest of this trip whenever he tries to talk to me?

“The hull’s too badly damaged for us to sail out of here. Chopper, why don’t you try and figure a way to fix it?” Zoro suggests.

My chest tightens at the mention of our home's condition. “Me? Ok!” Chopper exclaims.

“Why should he fix it? Are you going somewhere?” Nami demands.

“I’m going into the forest to get our stupid detective more information. This will be our base of operations, no doubt Luffy and the others are looking for us,” he announces. “Besides, you know what they say. If you get lost, stay where you are.”

“Take your own advice!” Nami snaps.

Zoro gives us a wry smirk. “This god is supposed to be here, right? I’d like to meet him.”

“That’s a terrible idea! What are you gonna do if you find him?!” Nami shouts.

“That depends on if he behaves,” Zoro says mildly.

“You’re crazy! What about his vassals, huh?! Don’t you know better than to anger gods?!” Nami wails, collapsing against the rail.

Zoro chuckles under his breath. “Sorry but… I don’t pray to gods.” Chopper's entire face lights up as he starts fawning. Nami just hunches over and prays. “I don’t believe in him anyway, so why do I care?”

I snicker. “I’ll tag along. Me and god have never really gotten along, anyway. And people always did say I had the devil's luck…”

“Sure. I think we can use this vine up here to swing over,” Zoro grunts.

“Can I come with you as well?” Robin calls from around the curve of the ship.

“Hah? As long as you don’t slow me down. Well, Ed’s more of a problem in that department,” Zoro responds. I kick him in the shin.

“You’re going too, Robin? Why?!” Nami whines.

Robin chuckles. “This altar must be a thousand years old. I just love historic relics like this.” She turns back to us with a glimmer of life in her eyes I only caught a glimpse of when she was looking at my spyglass. “Who knows what we’ll find? There may even be ancient artifacts or treasure.”

“Told you there’d be cool shit,” I sing. Robin rolls her eyes.

“I’m coming too!” Nami announces. Chopper squeals. “We’re looking for history!” says the girl with literal berri signs dancing around her head and in her eyes.

Zoro herds me back onto the ship and up the crows nest while Robin manifests a couple hands to throw the vine down. He clears his throat, then swings himself across with a Tarzan holler. I immediately start cackling, because it’s fucking hilarious.

“Me next! Me next!” I cheer, grabbing the vine as it swings back and throwing myself over the side of the crowsnest with a holler similar to Zoro’s. “Incoming!” I announce as I near Zoro, who crouched for a second to tie his shoe.

“Huh?” he hums, looking up right as I slam into him feet first. “GAK — ED WHAT THE HELL?!”

“Sorry! You got in the way!” I say without remorse, turning back to watch Robin catch Nami in a net of arms when she almost faceplants into a tree.

“You shoulda made the noise. It would have made your swing better,” Zoro advises. Nami takes a swing at him and misses.

“We’re leaving Merry in your hands Chopper! You can call backup if it gets too scary!” I call back to the ship. Chopper gives me the hoof equivalent of a thumbs up.

“What backup?” Nami questions, wiping sweat from her forehead.

I mimic a whistle and she ah’s in understanding. Then I spin on my heel back towards the massive forest. “Ok! Off to adventure we go!”

Chapter End Notes

Ed is the worst mix between incredibly blunt & oblivious and intensely self aware & over analytical. It's probably the 'tism. It's why you see Ed say unintentionally mean shit like with Vivi back in Alabasta and sometimes accidentally pushing insecurity buttons like with Usopp this chapter. I think about Ed's wack ass psychology too much.

Chapter 49: Chapter Forty Nine: When The Land Was Godless And Free

Chapter Summary

Foreigner's God - Hozier

This has been the entirety of the past thirty minutes. To be perfectly honest, it lost its charm after the first ten. I've already tripped over my own feet four times, five rocks, eight roots, one incredibly pissed sky snake, and the fucking *air itself* six times.

Chapter Notes

Me, every single time I post a chapter: BIRTH! I'M GIVING BIRTH! I CREATED THIS AND BIRTHED IT! BIIIIRRRTTTTHHHH!!!

Fun fact every time I think too hard about this fic I have to explain the whole plot to my friends (I have gone through the whole fucking outline no less then four times, these poor people) and I was gushing about an Ed fit y'all ain't gonna see for a looong long time and haha. My friend is an artist. And has not read this fic but knows everything about it. And wants to draw fanart. I love them so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The best part of trekking through big ancient forests with trees the size of skyscrapers? The sheer amount of tripping you can do on the roots.

"Ed! Get your shit together!" Zoro barks after I slam into his back for the fifth time.

"I'm not doing it on purpose!" I snap back.

"Will you two stop bickering?" Nami groans.

“Easy for you to say, you aren’t walking in front of them!” Zoro snarls.

This has been the entirety of the past thirty minutes. To be perfectly honest, it lost its charm after the first ten. I’ve already tripped over my own feet four times, five rocks, eight roots, one incredibly pissed sky snake, and the fucking *air itself* six times.

“Detective Domino, I’m starting to suspect you have a very skewed centre of gravity,” Robin observes.

“It’s not my fault,” I whine, “I think nature itself hates me.” I swear to god I wasn’t this clumsy before I died. Getting shmacked by a car must have knocked something loose.

Nami scoffs. “At this point I wouldn’t put it past it.”

My foot catches in a root. “MotherFUCKER—” My descent is halted by a hand clamping down on my wrist. I turn back, and see one of Robin's hands coming out of the tree we’re passing. “Thank you,” I mutter dejectedly.

We continue our journey forward, Robin giving me and Nami both hands up over a very tall root. A flash of movement catches my attention from the corner of my eye. Both me and Nami turn to it at the same time.

“Did you see that?” she mutters under her breath.

I squint into the dense foliage. The foliage blinks back at me. Er — well, a girl *in* the foliage blinks at me. Ah, shit, wait. I remember this girl! Uh… Isis? No, that’s not even close. Fuck, I don’t remember. She’s a Shandorian. She was cousins, I think, with the pretty lady. Or were they just friends? I dunno.

Why the fuck is she in Upper Yard? Oh shit, she’s getting dirt isn’t she?

Oh! This is my chance to get a message to the Shandorians! But if Eneru sees me try to contact these people, we're all fucked.

I turn away from the eyes and back to Nami. "I didn't see anything. Hey, you have a scrap piece of paper on you? I had an idea for a little something we could do to the ship I'd like to write down so I don't forget," I bluff.

She raises her eyebrow. "Uh, sure?" A sheet of paper is produced from her bag and ripped in half for me. I quickly snatch it and start scribbling with the pencil she hands me.

We're here on behalf of Mont Blanc Cricket (yeah one of those Mont Blanc's).

This God guy sounds like he sucks (we don't do well with authority).

We'll be having a bonfire in the woods tonight, pretty hard to miss (we're loud and obnoxious).

If you want to chat, or just have a chill party, we'll be here (PS our chef is very good. Like. VERY good. Food will be provided. Also there's a nice doctor).

Tell that guy who tried to kill us on the White Sea I think he's cool (PPS there might be wolves also at the party. DW they're chill).

I fold it in half and flash a smile. "Alright, let's get going!"

As the group turns to keep moving, I channel all my bullshit clumsiness and as I try to slip the scrap of paper into my pocket, it misses and flutters to the ground.

I keep walking. "Do you think there's like… a forest hotdog stand out here? I'm hungry."

"Nami, gimme the map," I ask another half hour into our sightseeing trip.

She grunts, reaching back into her pack without looking, and tosses a rolled up paper at my head. I catch it, by some stroke of a miracle, and unroll it over my knee. The landscape of accursed Jaya greets me. “Wrong map,” I call. A second one hits me in the face. I unroll that one on top of the other. I trace along the edge of the island until I find the altar, then try to follow whatever path we’ve been making.

“Wait a second,” Nami suddenly blurts. We all pause as she comes up beside me and shifts the maps. “Why does… Wait! Oh!” she exclaims. She reaches back into her pack and pulls out Noland’s journal, flipping through the pages until she comes to a stop. “I’ve got a hunch,” she starts cautiously. We all raise eyebrows at her. She turns and starts trying to climb up the tree beside us, grabbing vines and showcasing incredible bouldering talent.

“You think a poisonous bug bit her and now she’s hallucinating?” Zoro muses, watching as she almost falls then manages to catch herself.

“If she falls on her face it’s your job to catch her,” I tell Zoro. He grimaces, but moves closer to the tree as Nami nears a high branch. An arm sprouts from the branch and grabs onto the back of Nami’s shirt, hauling her up onto it without much fanfare.

“Aw, shit. Hey Ed? Can I borrow your spyglass?” she calls down. I shrug and pull the tub off my belt, handing it to Robin. She lifts her arm up, and hand after hand sprouts from it until it’s high enough Nami can take it.

“What do you think she found?” Robin asks, closing her eyes as the hand at the top oscillates to presumably get a better view.

“Who knows. Hey, is that a well?” I ask, pointing to some stone looking shit amongst the roots of the giant tree Nami is on.

Robin’s arms dissipate and she makes a beeline for it, leaving Zoro and I to watch Nami. “What do you see? Is it the god guy?” Zoro hollers up. We get no response. “Nami! Did you die?” he yells impatiently.

“No! We gotta go straight seaside! I wanna verify this up close!” she yells down.

“Do we have to? I don’t wanna walk,” I whine.

“Suck it up!”

———

“Did anyone else just hear an explosion?” Nami asks hesitantly, pausing in her careful crossing of a mossy branch the width of a cow.

“Yes. It’s not our problem until it’s our problem, as Ed says,” Zoro grunts from further down the branch.

“I think this trip could use a couple explosions it liven it uP—” I cut myself off by slipping and falling right off the branch. One of Robin's arms clamps down around my ankle and pulls me back up. “Thanks. I think I’m actually getting used to falling out of trees.”

Robin levels a dry look at me. “Please don’t be.”

“Ugh! Nevermind, let’s just keep going,” Nami grumbles.

“Can you tell us what the hell it was you saw already?” Zoro demands.

“Shut up! Just keep going! To be honest I won’t believe what I saw until we get there and I see it up close,” Nami mutters.

“...Me too,” Robin murmurs. “It’s been bugging me for a while, but I still can’t prove anything yet. A theory is only a theory until it’s proven, but if what I dreamed up turns out to be true, it’d be interesting,” she turns to give me and Nami an indecipherable look, “very interesting.” She tilts her cowboy hat down to shade one of her eyes. “My life's goal almost

seems less unattainable now." She gives us both a smile that almost feels real. "It's only a theory, though."

Nami blinks at her a couple times before silently nodding and walking past her. I shuffle up and pause beside her. "I don't know everything," I state. She arches an eyebrow. "So when you learn all there is to learn about your goal," I give her a big genuine grin, "please tell me about it!"

Her mouth goes slack and her eyes blow wide. Her teeth whistle as she sucks in a breath. I turn forwards and keep walking, leaving her stunned in my wake.

"Sure thing, Detective Domino," I hear her whisper under her breath as her footsteps start back up.

———

"I was right!" Nami announces once we make it to our destination.

"There's no fucken way," Zoro mutters. "How could this thing be here too?"

We stare at the half severed temple thing that's an exact replica of the half Cricket has made his home down on the Blue Sea.

"It's not in both places, they're both fragments of the same thing," Robin awes, "and that means this island used to be from the ground! That explains why it's dirt!"

"I knew it! I knew it was weird Cricket's house had a second floor but no stairs, and how it was right up on the cliff! Upper Yard was part of Jaya!" Nami exclaims. "And even more interesting, the way Ed laid those maps out made me think of something. If this really *was* a part of Jaya, I think I know—" she cuts herself off to turn back to us with berri signs in her eyes. "Oh *joy."*

I slap my hand over my forehead with a laugh. “Let’s save that thought for when we regroup. I say we head back to the ship and check if the others are there yet. Truth be told, I'm a little worried about Chopper.”

Nami claps her hands together with a grin. “Alright. I’ve seen everything I need to see here.”

_____

“Chopper! Where are you?! Did something happen?!” Nami hollers at our broken ship once we get back.

I’ve got a new bruise the shape of Tennessee on my thigh from falling out of a tree before Robin could catch me, and I’m just about ready to collapse on the floor to get off my feet. It’s nearing sunset, and the sky is beginning to dull into a hazy purple and bright orange flirting with the horizon.

“Why’s the mast missing? This isn’t really the time to be redecorating,” Zoro muses.

Nami smacks him. “Don’t be stupid! He was clearly attacked! CHOPPER!” she screeches.

“Maybe he was torn limb from limb,” Robin says mildly.

“Don’t even joke about that!” Nami cries.

“Our boy’s tough, I’m sure he’s fine,” I sooth, rubbing her shoulder.

I squint over at the carving on the side of the altar, it’s got a big old fist half hidden under moss and some kinda… monster maybe-a-dragon maybe-a-monkey thing on it. For the weirdest reason that feels important…

“Chopper! We’re back! Did something happen?” Zoro yells over.

There’s a weird noise from the ship, then Chopper is shuffling over to the rail absolutely sobbing. “Nothing scary happened! It was business as usual!” he wails. Aw man.

“Ah,” Nami deadpans.

“Uh… yeah. It’s ok, Chopper. We know you’re tough,” Zoro calls over slowly.

“Aw, honey. It’s ok, baby!” I holler. “You were super brave and we’re proud of you!”

“It’s ok, you can tell us everything,” Robin offers.

“Hey! Is that the Going Merry?! Ah! It’s the altar!” a very familiar voice screams from our left. From down the weird river through the woods comes sailing a little boat thing, with our three missing crewmates all aboard clamoring and yelling.

“No one’s dead! This trip is going great!” I say enthusiastically.

One quick (and slightly painful) trip across the cloud-water later, the whole gang is back on the ship. Chopper is explaining whatever the hell happened to him aside to Usopp while I trot up to Luffy.

“You look like shit. The hell happened after we got crab-napped?” I ask, thumbing some crusted blood off his cheeks.

He presses his face further into my hands. “We fought a guy with balls.”

I raise an eyebrow. “As opposed to a guy without balls?”

He nods emphatically. “Hey Chopper, you said that old knight guy was in the ship right?” Luffy asks, turning away from me to the doctor. While a group of them bound off into the galley to check on our guest, Zoro ambles up to me.

“You have enough for a plan yet?” he inquires.

I peek back out at the forest. “Just about. I’m still waiting for a couple chips to fall, but I’ve got a vague idea.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you to have this entire place embroiled in a game of 4D chess by sundown,” Usopp mumbles from where he’s trying to jam a stray board back into a gaping hole in the floor.

“You give me too much credit. I don’t actually know how to play chess,” I say with full confidence. “Besides, most of my strategy this time consists of hoping you fucks or someone stronger manages to take out the threat before it’s my problem.” Usopp and Zoro both give me weird looks and I shrug. “What? I literally don’t have a weapon this trip. And I finally got semi good at using it too! So I’m ducking behind the strongest person I can find and *praying.”*

There’s a sudden clammer from the upper deck as the rest of the crew returns from the galley. “Let’s go into the forest and set up by the lake. If something happens, it’ll be easier to fight there,” Sanji suggests.

“YEAH! CAMPING!” I shout in unison with Luffy and Chopper.

Usopp whips his head to us in horror. “Camping in enemy territory?! Wait—”

———

One bonfire and brutalized sky shark later, the campground is looking snazzy and smells great. “So the city of gold is really up here? Yes! This is the kind of adventure I’ve been waiting for!” Luffy cheers.

“That’s the spirit!” Nami snickers.

“Don’t forget about the warning that guerilla guy gave us! And we have to worry about this crazy Mantra shit too!” Usopp cries.

“God’s gonna be angry!” Chopper whines. Robin simply chuckles.

“C’mon, we’re pirates! We can’t just ignore fate when it drops treasure right in front of us!” Sanji laughs.

“We’re in enemy territory and vastly outnumbered. These are my kind of odds,” Zoro says with a smirk.

“I wonder if I can get a gun made out of solid gold outta this..? I mean, *practically* it’s a stupid idea, but for the lols…” I mumble to myself.

“Alright! Then let’s get that gold! After we go camping!” Luffy hollers.

After that we’re divided up into groups by Sanji. Zoro and Chopper are sent into the woods for soup ingredients, Robin wanders down to the shore to check things out, Nami is sat nearby going over papers of some kind, and me and Luffy have been given the glorious task of watching water boil.

“This is boring! I thought camping was fun!” Luffy whines, rolling around on the ground.

“You don’t have to watch it boil, idiot. Just pour the distilled water from the bowl into a flask when it’s full!” Sanji yells over. “Not you, Ed! You can do whatever you want and I’m sure it’ll be helpful! Just your presence is giving me boundless motivation!”

“I found a caterpillar!” I announce, holding my bounty up high.

Luffy immediately snatches it from my hands. “Oooh! He’s wiggly!”

“You two are children,” Nami grumbles from her makeshift desk.

I squint over at Sanji as he’s chopping vegetables. “Sanji. I have a question,” I start. “Is there a reason you and Zoro have matching goggles? Where the hell did you guys even get those?”

Sanji’s face goes pink and twists. “Me? Matching with that damn mosshead?!” The rest of his tirade is thankfully cut off.

“We’re back!” Chopper’s voice calls from the forest as he and Zoro make their return. “I got walnuts, aloe, bananas and garlic!”

“I got a rat and a frog,” Zoro states.

“Great. Chop ‘em up and put ‘em in the stew,” Sanji responds, glaring down at his cutting board and pointedly not looking over at them. Haha.

“Wait! There were weird things in there!” Nami shouts.

“Oh! You’re so right! No garlic, right?” Sanji gasps. Nami screams into her hands.

Robin comes striding back into the campground with a huge blue rock under her arm. “Ooooh. What’s that? A gem?!” Nami awes, mood going 180 at the appearance of something sparkly.

“It is rather pretty, isn’t it? But no, it's not a gem,” Robin chuckles in return.

“Oh! Is that a salt rock? That’s a good find,” Sanji exclaims. Robin nods. “Amazing job! Salt is essential for survival! Mosshead! Stop poking the frog and give me a hand!”

Honest to god, watching Sanji corral Zoro into using his swords as a stand for the stew pot is fucking hilarious.

“Ed, do you wanna take a break from being a dumbass for a minute to help me actually pull all our information together?” Nami grits out, turning away from the stupidity of the boys.

I shuffle over and plop down in front of her. “At this point everything seems straightforward enough. You figured something out about the map and the gold, yeah? Beyond that, unless Luffy decides he wants to derail and fight God, we don’t have to worry about the rest.”

Plus, my plan will remain half unfinished until I know the Shandorian’s answer.

Nami rolls her eyes. “Ugh, fine. I’m only really worried about the gold anyway.”

“Alright, soup’s ready! Ladies and Ed first!” Sanji announces, passing around bowls. I coo when I get mine, it has little fucking hear shaped carrots! That's goddamn adorable!

“Ok! Everyone listen up so we can go over tomorrow's itinerary!” everyone perks up as Nami holds up the maps she’s been futzing with. “Let’s go over what we know. Upper Yard was once part of Jaya, but was split around four hundred years ago from being hit by the Knock-Up Stream, same as us.”

“Could it really do that?” Chopper asks.

“That stream was fucking massive, I’m not surprised it lifted an island,” Usopp mumbles.

“It’s hard to assimilate this forest with Jaya’s.” Zoro speaks up around his food.

“Probably due to their differences in atmosphere. Something about the composition of Skypiea’s environment has rapidly sped up the growth of the flora and fauna,” Robin infers.

Chopper nods. “The south birds that saved us were huge too!”

“Speaking of, why — here — would south birds save you?” Sanji asks, plopping down onto a branch and tossing a bowl of soup at Zoro, who nearly fumbles it.

Chopper shrugs. “It probably had something to do with everyone calling the Sky Knight God.”

“God?! So we just have to beat up that old man?!” Luffy gasps, pointing back to where Gan Fall is layed out with Pierre.

“No you idiot!” Usopp snaps.

“Anyway!” Nami shouts, bringing everyone's attention back. She points to the spot on the map where we travelled. “We know what I said is true from the split building we found and what Robin has inferred about the ruins. What does that mean for our mysterious El Dorado? Observe!” She taps the map with a smug grin. “The last line of Noland’s journal finally makes sense with our revelation! He said the gold was in the skulls right eye! That’s right here! Tomorrow we can head right for this point and claim our reward! Well, half of us will. Half of us will stay back to watch the ship.” There’s an audible kaching as Nami adjusts her reading glasses.

The group immediately bursts into cheers. “Feast tonight, gold tomorrow!” Luffy hollers, arms pumping and smile a mile wide.

Robin takes a glance up at the nearly black sky. “We should put out any unnecessary fires so we don’t give our position away.”

Luffy pshaws. “That’s ridiculous. Didja hear that, Usopp? She wants to put out the fire.”

Usopp flicks his wrist. “Give the poor girl a break. Robin’s lived in the dark, it's not her fault she doesn’t know.”

Then they both collapse and start punching the ground. “You have to have a campfire when you’re camping! You just have to!” Luffy wails.

“Even if you’re about to die, you have to have a fire! That’s how camping *is!”* Usopp screeches into the dirt.

“No, they’re right. Camping is sacred, yaknow. Never disrespect a campfire,” I add sagely.

“You’re idiots,” Nami admonishes. “You know damn well what’s out there! Vassals, guerrillas, and who knows what else! There might be giant monsters!”

“Hey Luffy!” Zoro shouts from the other side of our encampment. “Is this good enough for a bonfire?” We all turn to where he and Sanji are standing proud in front of a giant stack of wood.

“NO! You’re *all* idiots!” Nami wails.

“It’s fine, Nami! Wild animals are scared of fire!” Sani comforts, holding up a torch while a bunch of glowing eyes open up behind him.

“They’re already surrounding us!” Nami sobs, diving behind me as a large wolf with a scar over one eye lumbers out.

It growls at us and Sanji just kinda stares down at it. “Uh, Chopper. Translation please.”

“‘You outsiders are being too damn loud! Go to bed, you dumbasses!’ That’s what he said,” Chopper translates.

“HAH?!” Sanji and Luffy shout in unison.

We all watch as Chopper and this wolf argue back and forth for a while. I have to turn around to stop myself from bursting out laughing.

Then Nami punches the wolf. “Nothing's standing in between me and that treasure!” she hollers.

There’s a long moment of silence before all the other wolves start growling at us louder than before. Then the original wolf barks at them. “‘Stand down boys. We may have the numbers, but they have the raw strength. Heh, you pack a mean punch, girl. You’re my kind of angry.’ Wow I can’t believe that worked!” Chopper awes.

The wolf and Nami smirk at each other in some kind of solidarity. “Ooh! I have an idea! Together campfire!” Luffy shouts.

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In no time at all, we’re partying with fucking wolves. Luffy has somehow managed to corral everyone but Robin, who’s sitting to the side, and Zoro, who’s drinking with a wolf, into doing this weird conga line around the bonfire while he and the wolves howl at the sky.

My head is starting to hurt from the non stop laughing, at some point someone had shoved a pot and spoon into my hand and I've been beating out the rhythm to All Star in a loop for god knows how long.

At one point I glance over and see Gan Fall conversing with my compatriots. I twirl over there, handing off my instruments in a smooth motion to a wolf who howls and starts making a beat much less consistent than mine, and come to a neat stop right beside Zoro.

"Yeesh! We haven't even taken down the BBEG yet, and we're already partying like this? I'm kinda scared of whatever our end of adventure party is gonna look like this time!" I laugh as Zoro passes me a bottle of my schnapps he's been babysitting this whole time. I rip the cork out of the bottle with my teeth and start chugging.

"Wha — slow down! We have shit to do tomorrow! No one is babysitting you if you get a monster hangover!" Zoro snaps. I flip him off.

Gan Fall throws his head back and laughs. "As I said, you folks sure are lively! It's… refreshing, to see such joy in Eneru's domain."

I give him a lopsided smile. "Well, I don't think we have to worry about him. At least for the night." Gan Fall raises an eyebrow while I shrug.

Zoro suddenly stiffens up beside me. I turn to look at him, confused. He points across the clearing. I follow his finger to the figure standing just in front of the treeline. Behind him, barely visible in the firelight, I can make out a whole hoard of other people.

"Is that so?" the figure's voice announces into our clearing. The wolves stop dancing and the Strawhats are on guard within milliseconds.

Wyper stands in the clearing with us, the Shandorians at his back and his bazooka on his shoulder.

“Then that makes you our only enemy tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise bitch.

My understanding of Eneru's Mantra based off what he tells Nami is this; he can pinpoint specific people and can hear every conversation that happens on the island, so he knows where people are and what they’re saying. Add that to our understanding of how Observation Haki works, and I come to the conclusion he could not read something somebody had written because he can’t actually ‘see’ everything in a traditional sense. Anyway that's not important because this is fanfiction and what I say goes and it wouldn't matter if he could read it either way.

Chapter 50: Chapter Fifty: My God’s Comin’ Any Minute

Chapter Summary

Way of the Triune God - Tyler Childers

“Ok, my party mood is dying faster than a housefly in old age. If you want to keep talking you can join in on the fun, grabs some food and booze, go see our doctor if you’re injured, and fucking relax,” I announce, leaning back with crossed arms.

Chapter Notes

I don't fuck with a lot of Christian country music, but something about Tyler Childers just fucks, yaknow? This song and Purgatory strike a very special chord within me. It activates the Christian sleeper agent that hides in my bones and every few months pops out and tells me I should run away and become a devout follower of God, for 'escape for responsibility' reasons. Please tell me that's something other people experience.

Ed: I make plans. I'm a planner.
Also Ed: Plans are for losers we're winging this shit. Coherency? Never fucking heard of her.

Guys can you believe we already on chapter 50 T-T that's crazy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wait! It’s that gorilla guy!” Luffy shouts, pointing a dramatic finger at Wyper, whose face twists at the label.

“Hi,” I call over, taking another big swig of schnapps. “You folks wanna join the party? We can grill up another sky shark.”

Wyper inclines his head back without taking his eyes off me. “This the one?”

Oh that bodes well. Is it bad I barely mind the intimidation because this guy is fine as hell?

Another person steps out of the foliage. A woman I recognize as that little girl's friend and/or cousin comes to a halt a few paces behind Wyper. Dark hair frames her stern face while she very deliberately places one hand on her big gun. "She matches Aisa's description."

Yeah that probably isn't good. Am I about to get murdered?

"You," Wyper snaps, glare focused on me. At my side Zoro pops Wado an inch out of its sheath.

"Hi," I repeat, slightly more nervous. "Also not to be picky, but it's 'they.'" I can't tell if the buzz of alcohol is making this better or worse.

The woman (who's name I cannot remember for the life of me) blinks. *"They* match the description," she amends.

Wyper's free hand raises up, a familiar scrap of paper pinched between his fingers. "What the hell is this?" he demands.

My eyes make a quick sweep of the Strawhats. Most of them are looking back and forth between me and the newcomers with trepidation. Sanji has stepped closer to where Zoro, Robin, Gan Fall and I are, but looks more torn between gawking at the woman at the moment.

"I asked you a question," Wyper barks. I startle and focus my eyes back on him. "Is what this says true?"

"Hey!" Luffy shouts. "Don't talk to Ed like that! You here to fight?! I'll take you on!"

"Luffy! Don't antagonize him!" Nami hisses, shuffling behind Usopp who shuffles behind Sanji.

“He’s the one atomizing me!” Luffy whines.

“Antagonizing. And nobody is doing that,” I correct, frowning but standing and taking a step forward regardless. “If you’re here to cause trouble, I suggest leaving now. Both of our energy could be better spent places other than fighting each other.”

“I — I’ll have you know my army of 80,000 soldiers are just waiting on my signal to turn this into a bloodbath!” Usopp screeches, head barely peeking out from behind Sanji. He’s graciously ignored by everyone.

Wyper’s jaw works before he’s grumbling and slapping the scrap of paper at the woman. She rolls her eyes then takes another step forward. “Are you truly here on behalf of a Mont Blanc?” she asks, lip between her teeth.

“Mont Blanc?” Zoro questions, voice closer than before. While I wasn’t paying attention he had stepped up to be shoulder to shoulder with me. “You mean Cricket? He’s part of the reason we’re up here, I guess.”

Murmurs spread through the Shandorians hidden in the woods. They cease immediately at the hand Wyper raises. Both his and the woman’s eyes are wide but there’s still a thick layer of distrust present.

“Only part? Then what is your purpose up here? I take the fact that you haven’t heeded my warning to get lost to mean you’re fools. So why the hell are you still here?” Wyper growls.

“The gold,” Luffy answers without hesitation. Nami smacks him with another hiss.

“Gold?” the woman asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Mostly adventure, to be clear,” I rephrase. “Heard there was a sky island, thought it’d be cool, then got wrapped up in some hundreds of years old family crisis, was told about some gold, now we’re here.”

“There’s also some god guy we have to punch,” Luffy adds.

Both the woman and Wyper startle, and a murmur sets out through their group. “Punch God?! Do you have a death wish?!” the woman snaps.

“Ok, my party mood is dying faster than a housefly in old age. If you want to keep talking you can join in on the fun, grabs some food and booze, go see our doctor if you’re injured, and fucking relax,” I announce, leaning back with crossed arms.

“Excuse me?” Wyper asks incredulously.

“You fucking heard me. We’re having a pregame party, and you’ve flushed my atmosphere. So get with it, or get lost,” I demand, sitting back down.

Zoro snorts and sits back down beside me. “You’re ballsy when you’re drunk,” he murmurs. I stick my tongue out at him.

The party pretty much resumes on that cue, heedless of the still gawking Shandorians. The wolf's weird dance gets going again and Luffy hooks and arm through Usopp’s to pull him in.

“So anyway, I’ve been thinking a lot about what a cloud beetle would look like. Do you think if I just send Luffy into the woods he’d come back with one?” I inquire.

Zoro scoffs. “That’s a terrible idea. But yeah he probably would.”

“Hey!” Wyper shouts, barely audible under the renewed din of the party. “Wait a — I was talking to you!”

“You heard my First Mate! If you wanna talk, you have to party!” Luffy laughs.

“I just put more stew on, should be ready in a few if the lovely lady wants any,” Sanji adds, winking at the woman who somehow manages to look even more confused.

Between one blink and the next, the Shandorians are out of the woods and scattered nervously around the campfire. A few of them have been pulled into the dance by Luffy or have been handed alcohol.

Wyper and the woman, along with some random older gentleman and a big guy with a hat like a basket over his eyes, have been shoved into sitting with my little group. Each of them except the older gentleman look stupefied.

“Like I said earlier, if you’ve got any injured we have the best damn doctor on the Grand Line with us. Of course, we understand if you decline such assistance,” I say diplomatically.

Wyper blinks at me stupidly as a bowl of soup is placed in his lap and one is presented much more delicately to the woman. “Uh — Raki, what’s happening?” he mutters to the woman.

“I have no idea,” she responds, staring down into the soup. “Braham?”

The man with the hat shakes his head. “Geppa?”

The old guy throws his head back and laughs, taking a long draw from a drink he got from who knows where. “May as well just go with it. Nothing worse than a wasted party!”

“Even if that party is with strangers and the former God?” Wyper responds dryly.

All heads turn to Gan Fall, who has been silent since the Shandorians arrived. “Don’t mind me,” he says quietly. Wyper’s face scrunches and his mouth opens before he’s interrupted.

There’s a high pitched yelp before that little girl from earlier is stumbling out of the foliage beside us, her arms pinwheeling as she tries to stabilize herself. She blinks up at the group of us for a long moment.

“Aisa?! What are you doing here?!” Raki cries, lunging towards her.

“Why the hell did you leave the village?!” Wyper demands.

Aisa shrinks under their voices, but her stare is locked on me. “What’s wrong with you?” she blurts, pointing at me. The group stalls for a moment.

I blink back at her. “That’s a long list, honey. We don’t have time for that.”

Her mouth twists. “No! I mean — why does your voice sound like that?”

I raise my eyebrow. “I’m a little drunk but I’m not slurring my words. If the gender thing is confusing you, I get it—”

“No!” she shouts, eyes darting around then back to me. “Why is everything *whispering* to you?!”

I pause. The whole group pauses.

“What does that mean, Aisa?” Raki asks gently.

“It’s just — it’s like — um, everything is — Ugh!” she huffs, frustrated at not having the words.

“Spit it out!” Wyper demands, a defensive tilt directed at me.

“Hey, don’t be an ass. She’s a nervous kid. You said everything is whispering to me? How so?” I question, voice turning gentle and patient when I address her.

Aisa blinks at me. Raki, Braham and Wyper blink at me. The old guy just chuckles.

“Uh. Um, it’s — it’s kinda like… like everything is trying to tell you a secret? Like everything is trying to talk to you at once. I don’t know, I’ve never heard anything like it before. I couldn’t even *tell* until I was this close,” Aisa mumbles.

“Huh,” I hum, settling back on my hands. “So the world’s tryna talk to me and I can’t even hear it. That’s useful. At the very least good to know I’m not broadcasting this like a radio tower to anyone in a hundred mile radius.”

“Suits a weirdo like you,” Zoro snickers.

“Curious…” Robin mumbles.

“Is this something you can hear with your Mantra?” Wyper demands.

“Mantra?” Zoro questions. “That thing Usopp was yammering about? I thought that was something the priests had.”

I elbow him. “It’s a skill, dumbass. It’s not exclusive to dickbags who beat up our doctor and the elderly. No offence, Gan Fall.”

Gan Fall waves a hand. “None taken.”

“Point is, Mantra is probably just fancy sky speak for Haki,” I summarize.

“Haki? Didn’t you mention that back in Alabasta?” Zoro asks.

“Pause! Rewind, Aisa! Why the hell did you come here?!” Wyper snaps.

Aisa shrinks behind Raki. “I, uh. I wanted to see these people for myself. And — and I heard Kamakiri’s voice—” she cuts herself off with a harsh bite to her lip.

Raki soothes a hand down her hat covered hair. “Kamakiri was injured in battle, but he’ll be fine.”

“No thanks to you,” Wyper grumbles. Raki’s hand curls tighter on Aisa’s head.

“Yikes. Infighting. Anywho, like I was saying, how do you think beetles have changed with the cloud evolution stuff? You think they like, fart clouds or some crazy shit now?” I ask, breaking the sudden tension.

Zoro snorts into his bottle. “Sure. Cloud farts are the directions evolution took them.”

“It’s not out of the question,” Robin adds. “Many things could have happened. Perhaps they have soft and puffy wings under their elytra, or pads on the ends of their legs.”

I raise my bottle in her direction. “Thank you for seeing the vision. I bet if we grab a couple we could keep Luffy entertained for at least a few hours, then hawk ‘em for money to keep Nami happy.”

“You didn’t answer my question!” Aisa blurts. “What’s wrong with you?”

I pause to regard her. “I got no damn idea, kid. This is the first I’m hearing of it, and we’ve met a couple people with a power like Mantra.”

Actually, now that I think about it… King Cobra said something to this effect, didn’t he? Something about me being privy to the world's secrets?

Fucken weird, man.

Aisa tugs on the bag over Raki’s shoulder until she releases it, then takes a peek inside. Her eyes light up and she bends down to add a handful of dirt to the bag. Raki chuckles under her breath and gives Aisa a fond smile. Wyper scoffs and both Raki and Aisa freeze.

“You ever made a mud cake?” I blurt, trying to disrupt whatever that argument might turn out to be. The whole group stops to turn to me. “Or like… made witch soup?”

“What the hell is witch soup?” Zoro asks incredulously.

“What’s a mud cake?” Raki asks.

I shrug. “A cake made out of mud. And witch soup is just like… I don’t know. You put random shit in a bowl or puddle or something and pretend it’s a potion. Like sticks and leaves and shit. I used to do it with my sister when we were kids. It’s just outdoor kid stuff, I guess.”

Aisa furrows his eyebrow and tugs on the sides of her hat headdress thing. “Um. No? We don’t really get to play with the Vearth, because it’s so rare,” she explains awkwardly.

I stare down at the ground for a second. “Right, fuck the party. We’re making mud cake,” I announce, chugging the rest of my schnapps and getting to my feet.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Zoro yelps when I step on his foot.

“I’m getting water, you done that? Great,” I say, snatching his empty bottle as well.

He scrambles to his feet to trail after me. “You’re drunk. And you’ll fall in or get eaten by sharks,” he complains.

My eyes catch on where Chopper is treating that guy I recognize as… Kamakiri? I give both of them thumbs up that they return. I pause to stare at where the wolves, Shandorians, and other members of our crew are doing the Cha Cha Slide by the fire. I’m not touching that with a ten foot pole.

Five minutes later, both of us soaked in cloud-water from the waist down and with one of my shoes in hand plus two bottles of liquid, me and Zoro get back to the group. They’re all dead silent when we return and I resist smacking myself for leaving all the anti socials together alone.

“Who’s excited?” I ask with a smile, channeling my inner summer camp counsellor. There’s no answer, but Aisa shuffles forward.

I pour out a quarter of my bottle into the dirt, then plop down and start mixing the mud. Aisa hesitantly drops beside me and sticks her hands in the mud. She makes a face and peers up at me from under her hat thing. “Is there… a point to this?”

I shrug. “Not really. It’s fun though.” I pick up a glob of mug and shape it into a ball to throw at Zoro. He ducks under it and scowls at me while I snicker.

Aisa stifles a laugh and takes a chunk of her own, molding it and taking an occasional glance at me. “So where you’re from, Vearth is everywhere?”

I nod. “I prefer the stuff *growing* in the dirt rather than the dirt itself, but that’s probably just bias because it’s not a commodity where we’re from. I’m a big fan of sunflowers. Y’all have sunflowers up here? You can stop me at any time if you want me to shut up,” I ramble. She snickers and holds up a little mud bell looking thing. I grin and give her a thumbs up of approval. “You’re pretty good at that. Ever considered pottery?” I praise.

Her cheeks go pink. “Do you like having your hair short like that?” she blurts, cheeks going pinker when her head catches up to her mouth.

I snicker a little. “Yeah, it’s way more comfortable than when it was long. Plus it makes people hesitate just enough before calling me a girl.”

She blinks a couple times. “So you’re… not a girl? You can *do that?!”*

I throw my head back and laugh. “Damn right you can! Gender is a game and I’m winning.”

She blinks rapidly, face looking the same way mine did when I found out you would wear plaid on plaid without looking like a Scottish baby. “And people just… are ok with that?” Aw she sounds completely in awe.

My smile turns soft and indulgent. “Yeah. And anybody who isn’t, ain’t worth your time.”

She stares out the dirt like it holds the secrets to the universe for a second before rapidly shaking her head back and forth like she’s clearing her thoughts out. “You said you like sunflowers?” she asks shyly.

I give her a lopsided smile, ignoring her rapid topic switch, and start shaping my ball of mud in the shape of one. “Yeah. I like ‘em cause they’re big and yellow. Since we’re always at sea, I don’t get to see them all that often.”

She appears to contemplate on something for a long moment before nodding resolutely. Then she’s scampering over to Raki and handing her the mud-bell-thing. I snicker and get up to sit

back down beside Zoro.

Chopper scuttles up and ducks behind me and Zoro while his patient ambles up to the Shandorians. “He’s going to be fine. I’d recommend taking it easy for a little while,” Chopper squeaks out.

“We’re fighting a war. There is no ‘taking it easy,’” Wyper growls. Chopper yelps and ducks further behind us. Zoro scowls and I see his fingers twitch toward his swords.

“Don’t worry about that. I can handle myself, fighting won’t be a problem,” Kamakiri states, clapping a hand on Wyper’s shoulder.

I smack my hand into Zoro’s back to get him to loosen up. “You guys sure are persistent! I respect that a lot!” I say with a grin.

Kamakiri and I share a glance that clearly conveys we understand each other’s positions as hot-headed idiot wranglers. Kamakiri looks down as Aisa holds up her mud bell thing and gives her a thumbs up that makes her beam.

I wave a hand over at where Sanji has stepped out of the fucking Cha Cha Slide, which has not ceased yet. “Sanji! Can I get more stew?” I call. He flashes me a bright smile and a thumbs up.

Robin is peering over at Aisa’s mud-bell-thing with interest. “Excuse me, may I ask about that?” she asks politely. Aisa slowly nods. “The bell, we’ve seen quite a bit of imagery about it in our journey so far. Does it have some kind of cultural significance?”

Wyper puts his hand up, the last unusable remnants of his hand rolled cigarette pinched between his fingers. “Why do you wanna know?” he growls.

“Robin is an archeologist. She likes learning about that kinda shit,” I reveal. Sanji twirls up to our group at that point, a large bowl of stew in hand that he passes to me after a kiss on my

hand. “Oh, thank you.”

Wyper grinds his teeth together for a moment, then pulls out another cigarette before he seems to realize he doesn’t have a light, which Sanji provides on his way back to the large campfire. Kamakiri snickers. Wyper blinks after Sanji for a moment before turning his eyes back to us.

“...The Light of Shandora,” he mutters. “It’s a golden bell, supposedly it exists in our ancient homeland. *That* is why we’re fighting.”

“You’re trying to reclaim your homeland, then,” Zoro concludes.

I’m distracted by that conversation when I notice the hat guy, Braham, is cleaning his weird looking guns. I immediately drape myself over Zoro’s lap (ignoring his squawk) to get a closer look. “What’re those?”

His head tilts up to regard me before returning to his weaponry. “Flash guns.”

The old guy, Geppa, laughs loudly and leans over toward me. “Don’t mind him, he’s not a very talkative guy. You interested in guns, kid?”

I nod. “I’m not the most knowledgeable about them, to be perfectly honest. My weapon of choice is a pistol, but the damn thing broke right as we were on our way up here.” I pull said pistol from my belt and hand it over when Geppa beckons for it.

“Hm. Yeah, the old girl’s definitely seen better days. Your chamber is eight different kinds of fucked up. What, you shoot a damn rock outta here? The barrel is scratched to hell!” he balks.

I shift my eyes away guiltily before they snap back. “Wait, are you a gun tech?! Usopp! Usopp this guy’s a gun tech!” I holler over to the campfire. Usopp’s head pops up over the sea of wolves and Shandorians before he’s scurrying over to us.

“Whaddya say? A gun tech?” he inquires.

I nod. “Yeah! He said my gun’s fucked! Geppa, this is our resident fixer. He’s been my main hope of getting this baby in working order but we both know basically fuck all about guns. You think you can help him?”

Geppa laughs. “Sure, kid! I don’t see why not! Maybe if you’re lucky I’ll throw in a couple of dial modifications.”

My eyes light up the same as Usopp’s. “You can do that!?”

He laughs harder. “Hell yes I can! Who do you think rigged up them flash guns?”

The two of them dissolve into nerd speak that I tune out as a weight flops down on my back. “Eeeeed,” my Captain whines. “I’m partied out. Wanna sleep now.”

I pat his cheek where it's not smooshed into my shoulder. “Yeah, yeah. Alright.” I turn to Wyper. “Not to be a bad host, but you guys should probably get outta dodge. God probably won’t be so lenient on you come morning.”

Wyper’s mouth pinches as he and his compatriots rise. “It seems I… acted harshly in approaching you. Our goals are not entirely misaligned.”

“Careful, admitting to that almost looked like it hurt,” I say wryly.

Wyper scowls. “Nevermind,” he snaps. “In the morning we continue our assault. God and his priests shall fall. You stay out of our way, and… we shall try our best to stay out of yours.” He hesitates a long moment before reaching his hand out.

Me and Luffy both stare at it for a second. Then Luffy grabs it and shakes it in big jerky motions. “I don’t really know what's going on, but ok! See ya, gorilla guy!” he laughs.

Wyper jerks his hand back and groans long and hard into his other, then spins on his heel and marches out of the clearing.

“Warriors of Shandoria, we’re moving out!” Kamakiri calls to the rest of the partygoers, picking Aisa up under his arm and following Wyper.

And just like that, it’s over. The Shandorians are all gone in the blink of an eye, and a majority of the wolves are already settled down around the dying fire, fit to go to sleep. The ladies had apparently disappeared into the tent while I wasn’t looking, and the rest of the Strawhats have also settled around the fire’s remains.

That’s where Luffy drags me, flopping down right on top of a wolf and pulling me with him. How fucking wild has my life become to the point where cuddling with a wolf isn’t the weirdest thing to happen to me this week?

“Good party. Good job,” Luffy mumbles while I tuck myself under his chin and around the wolf.

I hum. “Why thank you, Captain.”

“I gotta take a leak, can someone come with me? The woods are fucking scary,” Usopp announces.

Everyone groans.

“What are you, twelve?” Sanji hisses.

“Just go by yourself,” Zoro grunts.

“I’ll go with you, you want me to hold your hand?” I mumble sweetly.

“Ugh, nevermind,” Usopp grumbles, then he’s skittering into the woods by himself.

“Sure hope nothing eats him,” I murmur. Then I’m asleep.

_____

Morning arrives with the revelation that the Merry has been repaired and stripped of her chicken accessories.

“Look! I told you someone was here! I *saw* something! It wasn’t a dream!” Usopp screams, running around the deck like the headless chicken Merry is no longer.

I hug onto the mast where it’s been reattached, rubbing my cheek into the metal plates holding it together. “Merry, my love…” I whine. I love this ship so damn much. There’s no way in hell I’m letting go of her without a fight.

“I hate to say this, but it's pretty shoddy work,” Sanji admits.

“She’s beautiful! Watch your mouth!” I snap.

“I’m sorry! You’re right!” he yelps.

“Someone’s looking out for us!” Luffy laughs.

“Who the hell did it though? Wouldn't have been the Shandorians. And everyone else has been hostile,” Zoro muses.

“I thought it was a ghost…” Usopp moans. “But how did whoever fixed it know how the Merry originally looked? Without all the chicken shit, that is.”

“Worry about it later, we gotta get to work lowering the ship,” Zoro groans.

And isn’t that a chore. Let me save you the stress I was feeling, she gets down fine. Then we go over the plan once last time.

“Alright! Search team, you’ll follow this path due south towards where the ruins should be,” Nami instructs.

“Why aren't you going towards the gold, Nami?” Luffy questions.

“Because I’m scared,” Nami states confidently. “In the meantime, we’ll take the Merry all the way around the island and meet you guys at the rendezvous point here, then make our exit from Skypiea! And then we’ll be super rich!”

“Alright!” Luffy shouts, big smile on his face and hands on his hips. “Let’s go! Explorer team move out!”

“Right!” me, Zoro, Chopper and Robin all repeat back.

I thumb the singular mangled pin of seastone in my pocket, and set out.

Chapter End Notes

Ed, still drunk, learning deep lore about themselves: Wow I can't wait to forget this in the face of something more interesting in five minutes time!

Incase you were stressing over having no idea who tf Geppa was and not being able to remember him, dw about it. I made him the fuck up for strategic reasons.

Catch me transing the gender of background characters for no reason other than finding it funny. Like, is Aisa's gender itself relevant to the plot? No. Will Aisa have a fully realized gender crisis before the Strawhats get out of dodge? No. Will anything about that little revelation come to fruition in the context of this fic? No sir. Sometimes the most important things are the crises we leave behind us.

In other news I absolutely CRUSHED a group presentation yesterday. So in honour of that, a fun fact; during WWII women had to wear skirts shorter because they needed the extra material to make military uniforms.

Chapter 51: Chapter Fifty One: I Will Worship As I Please

Chapter Summary

Tiny Gods - James Shayfer

“Shut the fuck up! I hate everything about this stupid cursed trip!” I sob.

Chapter Notes

Me, taking a writing course as part of my program and learning I've using en dashes instead of em dashes and looking at the 230k+ I've already written: Well shit.

Am I going to go back and fix all that? We'll see.

(Future message from the Big Edit™, yeah you stupid cunt you fix it. Thanks for fucking NOTHING, nearly at 400k now and you didn't fix it when you had HALF THE WORK?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey, you’re going the wrong damn way!” I snap for what feels like the millionth time. “At this rate it might be simpler to just tie us all together!”

Maybe we should invest in one of those line things they make kindergarteners hold on walks.

“Zoro you dummy, it’s this way!” Luffy announces, walking the wrong direction.

“Use your head as something other than a hat rack for once! Nami said to go to the right eye! This is right!” Zoro squawks, turning to the left.

“You’re all so fucking stupid,” I cry into my hands.

Robin pats me on the back. “There there, Detective Domino.” There’s twin shrieks from both Zoro and Luffy as they’re tripped by Robin’s auxiliary limbs. “South is this direction, boys.”

Luffy’s got a stick and is waving it around by the time we’re back on track. He’s humming some kinda tune under his breath while I match his steps and duck to avoid a stray stick swipe. “Careful where you point that thing,” I grumble.

“Sorry Ed!” he laughs, switching hands to swing it where it won’t wack me.

“I thought this forest was going to be scarier,” Chopper admits, snatching a short stick of his own to wave around.

“You feeling brave Chopper?” Luffy laughs.

“I think so. Haha!” Chopper responds with a laugh of his own.

“I know what you mean. This island’s been a huge let down. When we were in here yesterday we didn’t even meet one of these vassal guys,” Zoro complains.

“Are you two so eager for something dangerous to happen?” Robin chuckles.

“Hey, there’s supposed to be a huge bell in El Dorado, right?” Luffy suddenly asks.

Robin hums and nods. “According to Noland’s journal and the account I got from the Shandorians, yes.”

“Why do you ask?” Zoro says.

“If we rang it do you think the monkey guys and diamond head guy would hear it?” Luffy wonders.

I snicker and ruffle his hat back and forth on his head. “You’re onto something, Captain. That’s a great idea.”

Robin chuckles under her breath. “There’s certainly a chance, based on what we know about it.”

I squint ahead of us. “That’s a weird looking branch,” I point out. The branch moves. “Oh.”

“You can see that too?!” Chopper shrieks. “I thought I was imagining it!”

The ground starts to shake as the massive snake rears its head out of its hiding place to bare its gigantic fangs at us.

“Oh. Oh we should run,” I suggest.

The snake opens its mouth and fucking *screams* .

Cue everyone else screaming. We’re off like shots, tearing through the underbrush and over real-not-snake roots while Luffy laughs like a maniac. “Giant snake!” he cheers, like this is something we should be excited about.

The giant snake lunges at us. We all disperse. “Oh my god OH MY GOD—” I scream hysterically, trying to throw myself out of its path. I nearly don’t make it, if not for Chopper tackling me out of the way.

The snake’s jaw clamp onto a tree as it misses us, and we all watch in horror as the base of the tree fucking *melts.* “Oh…” Robin sighs from her pech up in another tree.

“POISON?!” Chopper screeches beside me.

“Uh — change of plan. We’re running away,” Zoro gapes.

“Sounds good,” Robin responds.

“Scary!” Luffy announces, still sounding way too overjoyed for our situation.

“Fuck this. FUCK THIS!” I scream as the snake turns back around to us.

“Don’t let that shit touch you! You’ll die instantly!” Zoro advises.

“Shut the fuck up! I hate everything about this stupid cursed trip!” I sob.

“Snakey snakey! This way! Follow meeee!” Luffy sings, swinging on a nearby branch.

The snake instead turns its eyes on Robin. As it lunges for her she kicks off the tree in a graceful flip, arm extending up to catch the hand she grows down to grab her. The snake turns back to Chopper as he goes running the opposite direction screaming bloody murder.

“SCATTER!” I holler, turning tail and running in a different direction.

I scream non-stop for the first minute, and don't stop sprinting until another ten more after that. By the time I get my wits back and take a second to think, I realize I’m hopelessly lost with no hope of finding my crewmates.

“Shit,” I hiss between my teeth. Fuck, I have no clue which way south is. “C’mon, if church camp taught you one thing…” I mumble, digging around in my pockets for anything I can use as a needle. Lo and behold, a maybe two inch length of wire Usopp must have snuck in there.

Fifty or so rubs across my wool socks later, I place it on a leaf in a nearby puddle and wait for it to turn. “If that’s north, then south is…” I pluck my wire back up and tuck it away, setting back off in the correct direction. “I’m pretty off track, but it should be fine.”

When did I develop these ‘talking to myself’ habits?

Either way, better pray I don’t run into any of the vassals or those… goat guys? I think they were goats. That old guy Geppa still has my pistol, not that it would have worked anyways. Fuuuuuuck, I should have tried harder to stick with Luffy. If I get murdered out there I’ll be pissed.

There’s distant sounds of explosions and fighting from almost every direction as I walk. I can only hope they stay the fuck away from me.

The taste of copper suddenly floods my mouth. I part my lips to get my tongue away from the welded bars of my permanent braces as they shock me. “Ouch! The hell?” I grumble, pausing in place. “Weird…”

I take a quick scan of my surroundings, turning around to check there too, and heaving a sigh when there’s no one. I turn back forward to continue and stop dead in my tracks.

“Hello,” Eneru greets tonelessly, lounged across a tree branch idly spinning his gold staff and staring down at me impassively.

My first thought is *yeesh he really does look like Eminem.* My second thought is *oh I’m fucked, aren’t I.*

“Hi,” I respond weakly.

“You’re a Blue Sea dweller. The one that fraternized with the Shandorians. And you could tell I was watching you,” he says, not a question but a statement. “I’m not sure I like you.”

Every corner of my mind is setting off siren sounds. Alarms are blaring loud enough to drown out the pounding of my blood. “Wow, your abs look great,” I blurt.

STUPID! STUPID STUPID STUPID!

He blinks slowly, expression not changing. “What.”

I laugh slightly hysterically. “I was iffy on the God thing, but those pecs sure are divine!”

His face is still entirely blank. “Alright. I think I’m going to kill you now.”

FUCK.

“OR INSTEAD OF DOING THAT, ANYTHING ELSE WOULD BE BETTER!” I shriek.

“You don’t seem to serve a purpose here, so I have no use for an extra piece in my game,” he states, one hand raising towards me.

FUCK FUCK FUCK *FUCK FUCK* ***FUCK—***

“I’VE SEEN THE FUTURE!” I blurt, hiding behind my arms like it’ll save me.

RIGHT TO THE TRUMP CARD?!

After a long moment of silence I lower them to peek at Eneru. He's still staring at me blankly, but there's something like intrigue in those eyes of his. "Have you?" he asks mildly. I nod frantically. "And that is something you wish to share with me." I nod slightly slower. He sighs, then in the blink of an eye he's towering over me, almost nose to nose. There's a large hand lazily clenched in the front of my shirt and his staff is stabbed into the ground behind me. "Tell me something."

It's not a request. It's a demand.

"Five people!" I squeeze out. My extremities have gone cold in fear. "You predicted five people would survive your game, you included! But it's actually six, so you take one of them out!"

He hums. "You'll have to do better than that." I see his other hand raise out of the corner of my eye.

"You're going to the moon!" I shout. The hand pauses. "You call it Endless Vearth. The realm of Gods."

He hums again. "What is it you want." He doesn't phrase anything like a question. It's only demand after demand.

"Take me with you," I breathe out.

Nami strategy or bust. There's no way in hell he'll actually believe I'm on his side, even with his narcissism, but this is my best bet at uh — not dying right now.

"Why would you want that?" he asks with a raised eyebrow, the first real question posed between us.

“You’re God,” I say, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “Who else is worth following?”

The words taste like bile in my mouth, especially directed at him. I fear for a second I misjudged the situation. I belatedly remember the gnarled piece of seastone in my pocket and resolve to get this piece of shit as comfortable with me as possible. I’ll have one shot to get him with it and he’ll be able to predict any attack I make.

I’ll just have to make it not matter whether he can see it or not, just make it a certainty that it’ll hit.

“Do you know where I have just come from?” he asks, staring right into my soul. I remain silent. “Your friends aboard your ship. And I left them in shambles.”

My chest tightens and anger stirs up in my stomach, not that I let any of that show on my face. “You took down Sanji and Usopp. Left Nami and Gan Fall,” I recite, tone much more even than I feel. “You went to say farewell. To taunt the former God.”

The corner of his lip quirks up. “And that doesn’t bother you.”

I shake my head. “The poor decision making of idiots is of no concern to me,” I say softly.

Eneru laughs. He throws his head back and fucking laughs. “You’d betray all your friends just like that? Priceless! Though you have acted like a prideful coward since you arrived in my land,” he says with a smirk.

“I know the limits of my pride,” I murmur. “I’m only above so many people. And no one is above the divine.”

Christ almighty, I’ve never been so thankful for my religious trauma and self confidence issues. That and the lying stuff. I have no actual pride to speak of, and I’m just gonna assume he didn’t pick up on the sarcasm in all my pride based jokes since we got here.

I mean… A win's a win.

"So you're prepared to watch me kill everyone, are you?" he asks, looking more amused and pleased by the second.

"I mean, I'd prefer if you… ah, left my crew alone? If at all possible?" I hedge.

He hums lightly, tapping a finger on his chin. "I'll consider it, if they comply. And the rest? Will you negotiate for the Shandorians and Skypieans?" Oh he looks too fucking smug. I already hate this guy.

"May I negotiate to have you kill them all at once instead of hunting them down? Like just wait until you destroy the whole of Skypiea?" I put forward hesitantly.

He hums, tilting his head back and forth. "Hmm… Nah." I pinch my lip between my teeth. Worth a shot. "Will you accept this outcome? Or will you back out of this little deal?" he asks, still looking like a smug piece of shit.

But when in doubt, flirt like your fucking life depends on it. Because it does. Acting skills don't fail me now.

I lean towards him even as static dances across my skin. "For you, for *God almighty,* I would," I say breathlessly, only cringing a little internally.

If I had any shame, this might actually be hard.

He laughs again. "If nothing else, it's funny to watch you humiliate yourself. Once this battle royale is done with, you'll entertain me with your prophecies."

His hand disappears from the front of my shirt. I don't even have the opportunity to be grateful for the tiny modicum of distance before his arm snaps around my waist and he's tucking me under it like a piece of luggage.

I'd compare it to how Luffy's psycho ass keeps carrying me, but despite the performative terror I've never felt anything but safe in my Captain's arms. This man only makes me feel afraid.

I watch as Eneru tilts his head to the left. "Hm. Let's start there. Fair warning, I don't much care how travel like this affects you."

"What—"

Every single one of my hairs stands on end. Everything just kinda goes white, and for once it isn't because I'm in ungodly amounts of pain or — you know. When the light fades, we're somewhere entirely new.

Eneru's staff is in my hands, and he has a Shandorian warrior by the face with his. The warrior is already burnt to a crisp, and I can hear someone yelling below us.

"Looking for me?" Eneru calls out. "I'm right here. What do you want, Shandorian warrior Kamakiri?"

Aw fuck.

"ENERU!" Kamakiri bellows.

"You forget your place. You shall address me as the almighty God," Eneru scolds, tossing the guy in his hand to the ground then taking his staff back.

Kamakiri's eyes's catch on me. "Wait, aren't you…" I sheepishly wave at him. His face twists. "What exactly is going on?!"

Eneru laughs. "This here is my new prophet! Ah yes, you're acquainted aren't you? A shame, to find out someone who offered you aid could care less about your struggle." My eyes flash.

*Oh this **motherfucker.***

I don't really have a choice. I sit there, limp in his arms, and take it. Kamakiri's eyes are hidden behind the red lenses of his sunglasses, but his expression turns resigned. He levels his spear at Eneru without a word.

"Yahahaha! So you want to kill me? Go ahead and try — You know what? For the next five minutes I won't even move," Eneru cackles. "I won't counterattack, I won't even lift a finger."

Uhhhhh — is he just gonna let me get shishkebab-ed? Fuuuuuuuuck, how did I get myself in this situation?!

"Give it your best shot," Eneru challenges. "You will learn how futile it is to defy a God."

"Er — sorry. Not to interrupt, but do you want me to get out of the way?" I mumble.

Eneru glances down at me. "Hm. No, I think it will be much more entertaining for you to simply try to dodge."

My eyes bug out. THIS MOTHERFUCKER. "UH. Are you sure?! I'm not 100% I'd survive that?!" I shriek.

He throws his head back and laughs, the rat bastard. "Guess you better pray then!"

I HATE THIS GUY.

Then suddenly Kamakiri is in front of us, spear sweeping out for a wide hit. I tuck myself into as small of a ball as I can, because Eneru *won't fucking let go of me and I can't move,* and do just as he says. I pray.

My eyes are squeezed tight, and a crackle sounds from above me.

"Oh? So you're still trying not to hit this one even after they betrayed you?" Eneru laughs.

I crack my eye open. Kamakiri is perched across on the branch, sweat dripping off his face and his mouth twisted in a determined scowl. And I'm not dead or sporting a new bruise.

Huh.

Kamakiri's gravity defying mohawk is somehow standing straighter than ever, and I note his clenched teeth with a growing pit in my stomach.

"Give it your best shot," Eneru repeats, mouth a cruel smile.

_____

Five minutes is a remarkably long time.

Kamakiri gives it his damn best the entire way through. Slashes, jabs, different angles, he tries fucking everything. It's obvious from the get-go that he's a damn good fighter, but it's still not enough.

And through the whole godforsaken thing, he never hits me once.

Eneru, the fucking toad, takes a damn nap through half of it. “What the hell is wrong with this guy?!” Kamakiri grits out. And when I say the poor fucker is looking rough, I mean he’s looking *rough.*

Patches of his skin have started frying off. Blood is oozing out of his nose and mouth. His wings are… kinda really fucked looking. The left lens of his sunglasses is cracked right through the middle. Lichtenberg figures are clawing their way up his arms, and his hands have taken the worst damage of it all. I’m fucking amazed he’s still even able to hold his spear.

“Fucking Logias,” I mutter under my breath.

“Now now, prophet. Be grateful you’re not fighting him at all,” Eneru says lazily. Kamakirki lets out a battle cry before lunging for the umpteenth time. He lances his spear right through Eneru’s dumb stupid head. “You look beat,” Eneru observes, a twisted amusement to his words.

“Why — won’t you… die..?!” Kamakiri shouts through chattering teeth. He’s practically vibrating, electricity making his muscles jump under the skin like a bag of snakes.

“You poor fool. You still don’t get it? I’m *lightning.* How could a mere man hope to defeat such a thing?” Eneru drawls. “You live in the sky, you must know. Since ancient times men have always taken their fear of the unknown and called it an act of God. Anything they couldn’t control was considered divine providence. I *am* that providence.”

Eneru finally lets go of me. I drop onto the thick branch and nearly slide off the back of it, it’s a mad scramble to grab onto the moss covering the wood. Kamakiri leaps back, putting distance between himself and Eneru, and whips out a stick with some kind of dial on the end.

So, uh, flaming swords are a thing here. Got it. Kamakiri yells as he makes a final broad swing, the flaming sword just barely missing my head as it cleaves Eneru in half, along with the tree trunk behind him.

That was fucking awesome.

Eneru's severed electric head raises an eyebrow. "Your five minutes are up." Then he's gone. There's flashes of light and arcs of electricity, and then he's on a new tree entirely. "I'll defend myself now," he announces. "You really should start running."

Kamakiri gives me one last unreadable look, then jumps from the tree down to the cloud stream, jet board already under his feet. An arc of lightning hits the tree beside me, Eneru appearing for a brief flash to command, "stay put," before he's gone once again.

There's a bright flash from down the cloud stream where Kamakirki has managed to retreat to. I hear him scream a sound so raw it makes my throat hurt just hearing it, then the entire river lights up vibrant blue white.

Is a single piece of seastone even going to be enough?!

I gape down at the river, still sparking with excess electrical discharge. "The electricity has reached the milky road. What a pity," Eneru's voice laments from beside me. I jerk in place, eyes darting up to where he's perched staring blankly into me. "That silenced twenty voices, the fools." His blank blue eyes pierce right through my soul. "This game started with eighty one people. As of now, a mere six of God's army remain. Twelve of the Shandorians still scurry amongst the dirt. And five of your Strawhats."

My Strawhats. My strong, resourceful, undefeatable Strawhats. This piece of shit is no match for them.

His expression remains blank. "Then there's you, and then there's me. That's twenty five remaining contestants of my game. More than I predicted, but how does it match against yours? No matter…" A cruel smile works its way across his mouth. "There are still survivors. Now the real hunt begins."

_____

If nothing else, being carted around under Eneru's arm while he fries people alive is a great way to see the forest. After the first five guys, the smell of burnt flesh just kinda stops making me nauseous.

If I ever doubted how desensitized to carnage I was… Anyway. It eventually comes to a point where Eneru pauses in his relentless assault to tilt his head upwards. "Hm. It seems our final contestants have all made their way up above the clouds. Shall we go greet them?"

I shrug. "If that's what you wish, God."

I mean, I'd really rather do anything else because the very thought of my friends seeing me with this fucking cretin is vomit inducing. He snickers like he knows damn well what I'm thinking.

His neck suddenly ticks like he heard something. "Ah. It would seem that's my cue."

Then we're gone. Travelling with him feels fucking weird and I don't like it. To be fair, I don't like much of anything about this situation, but the transportation in particular is quite fucking awful.

One second I'm not even a goddamn person, the next we're standing on some clouds and staring at Raki's back while she yells into some weird cage thing.

Wyper sees Eneru from inside the cage. "No! Don't!" he screams.

"Did you call for me?" Eneru drawls, somehow managing to sound more ominous than he has this entire fucking time in just those five words.

Raki turns to face us, looking like she's missing every last ounce of blood from her face. Then her eyes catch on me. "What..?"

Eneru glances down at me and smirks. “What, this? Just a stray I picked up,” he sneers, hoisting me up. I scowl but remain silent.

Raki’s eyes dart across the two of us looking absolutely petrified.

“Stop! Eneru don’t! She’s surrendered her right to fight!” Wyper screams, bloody hands clenched in the barbed wire fence of the cage. Even as one of those goat guys rears up behind him, he continues to scream. “Raki! Raki don’t even try! Get out of here!”

Raki, still looking absolutely petrified, levels her gun at Eneru and shoots two shots into his chest. They do fuck all, going right through as sparks arc off the rapidly closing holes.

Then she turns her gun at me.

There’s a long moment of silence across the battlefield. Even Wyper’s screaming ceases.

“I spoke with Kamakiri,” she whispers, voice strangled. “He told me two things. One; to give Wyper his message. Two…” Her eyes are flashing with emotions too quick to decipher. One last shot sinks through Eneru’s chest, inches from my head. Her face settles in the same resigned look Kamakiri’s did. “Thank you for being kind to Aisa,” she whispers.

Then she turns back to Wyper, completely ignoring Eneru. Wyper is staring completely stoic, even as one of the goat guys attacks him from behind. “Raki you idiot,” he grits out.

“Wyper, Eneru is…” she never finishes her sentence. Eneru simply reaches out and grabs the barrel of her gun, channels hundreds of volts of electricity through it, and takes her down.

Eneru laughs. That stupid heinous son of a bitch fucking laughs and rage boils so heavily in my stomach I nearly choke on it. Wyper seems to feel the exact same way.

I distantly hear Zoro call my name.

Wyper slams the face of the goat guy into the fence, maintaining intense eye contact with Eneru.

Eneru snickers. “You’re softer than I thought you were, Shandorian warrior Wyper,” he gives Raki’s smoking body a cursory glance before looking back to Wyper, “women can be warriors too. All the lambs who challenge me are equal in my eyes.”

At least he isn’t a sexist? “Equal opportunity violence,” I mutter numbly.

Eneru throws his head back and laughs loudly. He gives Wyper a condescending smirk. “Just try not to die. Yahahaha!”

Then we’re gone once again.

Chapter End Notes

E. D. 'natural enemy of God' Domino choosing the most buttfucking insane route they can: Absolutely nothing can go wrong with this.
Ed when it absolutely goes wrong: WHAT THE HELL?!

The plan for this arc was split between 'fucked up Eneru and Ed religious trauma adventure' and 'Conis and Ed buddy cop adventure' and I went with the one that would hurt more.

Chapter 52: Chapter Fifty Two: Every Fibre In Me Screamed Out But I Couldn’t Make A Sound

Chapter Summary

The Tornado - Owl City

I really dropped the ball on this fucking plan. I’m being treated like one of those fortune teller coin booth things. “Solid gold bell. Sounds about right,” I mutter. “Not to deprive anyone of this great view of my ass, but can I please face the other direction? I can’t see shit.”

Chapter Notes

Thank god for reading week. I think going to classes this week would have sent me over the edge lmao.

The recent chapters have been giving me so much trouble T-T I was so exited to have a week to just write but inspiration is a cruel mistress. I've finally gotten into LRLL though so maybe it'll get a bit easier.

WE HIT 200K WORDS RAAGHHHHHH!!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eneru takes us right to Robin.

Because of course he does, the fucking prick. We land up on a broken wall of the ruins of Shandora, and my breath momentarily leaves my body. The huge ruins are beyond majestic, the temple that reminds me vaguely of Tenochtitlan sits silent and majestic in the middle, and the tall beanstalk Giant Jack spears through the ground and rises through the cloud layer nearby.

When I finally finish aweing at the ancient city and start paying real attention to our immediate surroundings, I instantly spot where Robin is inspecting some half grown-over railway tracks.

Eneru laughs at her mumbling to herself, alerting her to our presence even though she doesn't turn around. "Impressive, isn't it? That a city can persist even in such a place. My idiot predecessor didn't even notice it," he drawls.

Robin does a half turn. "Who are—" she cuts herself off when she sees me. Emotions rapidly flash across her face before settling into something indecipherable.

"I am God. This is my prophet. Say hi prophet," Eneru snickers, shaking me like a misbehaving cat.

"Hey Robin," I grumble, glaring at the ground.

"...Good afternoon, Detective Domino," Robin says, tone completely unreadable.

Eneru snickers again. "In any case, I'm impressed. You must be an archeologist from the Blue Sea. It took us several months to find these ruins, but I suppose it's easier when you can read the symbols. You, did you know this was here?" he inquires, an eyebrow raised at me.

I shrug. "I did."

That makes him laugh his stupid fucking laugh again. I am quite sick of it. "Magnificent! Do you also know where the gold has gone then? How far do your visions go?"

I groan. "Dude, please just assume I know everything. If you *want* me to tell the lovely lady exactly where you put the gold and what you're using it for, by *all means—"*

I go airborne for a second as he tosses me up over his shoulder. My head smacks on one of his stupid fucking taiko drum ring things and I yelp. "Alright, that's enough of you," Eneru states, jabbing a finger into my side and zapping me like a taser.

I HATE THIS GUY SO MUCH. WHY DOES HE SUCK SO HARD.

"...So. Was the golden bell also here?" Robin inquires.

GODDAMNIT. I can't tell her to shut the hell up with this jackass watching me! Why didn't we develop secret codes or some shit?! We're getting together as a crew doing that as soon as this mess is over!

Eneru pauses in crunching on an apple he got from somewhere. "...Golden bell? Hm. I'm intrigued. Just what did you read on the symbols? Or rather, do you know anything my prophet wouldn't?"

Oh. Oh shit did I put Robin in danger because I've taken away the leverage her information gave her?!

Robin's voice picks back up and I try twisting my head to get a better view of whatever is going on. "That's too bad. If the grand bell and the belfry — the pride of Shandora — weren't here when you arrived they must not have made it here—"

"No, wait. The bell is up here!" Eneru interjects. "There's tell of when Upper Yard first arrived in the sky — they say there was a great bell ringing in the sky. The elders called it the island's singing voice. Hm… so the bell was solid gold? Any input, prophet?"

I really dropped the ball on this fucking plan. I'm being treated like one of those fortune teller coin booth things. "Solid gold bell. Sounds about right," I mutter. "Not to deprive anyone of this great view of my ass, but can I please face the other direction? I can't see shit."

Eneru hums lightly. "Hmmm… Nah."

...Prick.

“Prophet, where’s the bell? The game is nearly over, only eight minutes left. Might as well go get it now,” Eneru commands.

“Uuuuhhhh…” Where exactly was the bell again? I know it's super high because Luffy punches him into it while they're way up on the Maxim, but… Is it on the beanstalk? I seriously can’t remember.

“Do you not know?” Eneru asks, exasperated.

“It’s been a while, gimme a second!” I snap. Then immediately back pedal. “Er — I mean, uh… sorry. Up, God. You’ll pass it on your way up. If we’re on schedule, you should be getting an up close and personal look in say… a couple hours, maybe?”

Hehe. Yeah, *real* up close and personal.

“You sound uncertain,” Eneru observes. “And ‘it’s been a while?’”

I hiss a hum through my teeth. “Detail sometimes gets muddled, you see a lot of shit you’re bound to forget some. You know how it is,” I explain awkwardly.

There’s a short moment of silence.

“...Alright, up. Then we’ll—” Eneru cuts himself off and tilts his head back. “I sense a maggot at the edge of the island.”

I furrow my brow. Who..? “Oh,” I blurt. “Pagaya and Conis. One of the Divine Warriors escaped.” I think..? Dude, I think my memory is getting worse. Maybe it’s the stress?

“Yahahaha, right you are! Seems you aren’t losing your touch yet. Yes, two Skypieans and one of the Divine Warriors. That’ll need to be taken care of,” Eneru chuckles.

I jolt on his shoulder. “Uh, does it? They’ll all be dead soon anyways. Why waste the energy to take them out now?” I suggest, trying to keep my voice even. I can’t for the life of me remember if Pagaya survives Eneru’s blast, but I’m not taking chances.

Eneru pauses. “Is that so..? That’s the way you feel?”

That… I did not like the sound of that.

“Hm. Perhaps you’re right,” he says, and I can hear the smirk in his voice. “But then again, perhaps you’re not.”

My stomach drops as there’s a distant crackle and boom. I can see the giant column of light as it strikes down across the island. Eneru turns, presumably to take a gander himself, and I’m forced to meet Robin’s eyes.

Her face is pale white. Her jaw is on the floor. Our eyes lock for an infinitesimal moment in time and I swear I can almost see her pupils shaking from here. I’m sure for a second my face is just as horrified.

“Anymore input, prophet?” Eneru croons, still turned to the distance.

I can’t for the life of me tear my eyes away from Robin’s. “No, God,” I whisper, trying to drown myself in her stare.

“Wonderful. Then let’s bring this game to its peak,” Eneru announces, turning back around and ripping me from Robin’s eyes. He raises his other arm to the sky.

“Wait! What exactly did you just do?!” Robin’s panicked voice asks.

“I bestowed mercy. A pitiful worm was in pain, so I saved him from it. It was my duty as God. The young woman is still behaving quite desperately, but desperation is the most entertaining emotion,” he explains, hand patting my side. “But like I said, I think it’s time this comes to a close.”

“What—” Robin is cut off by the beanstalk behind us suddenly lighting up with electricity. It travels up the stalk and blasts the clouds around the bottom away, sending a ripple through the rest that triggers some incredibly ominous cracking sounds.

“Oh shit!” I curse as chunks of stone and rubble start crashing through the gap around us.

“What the hell are you — ?!” Robin cries out, crouching as the air itself trembles.

“Yahahaha! Let’s move to the finale!” Eneru laughs to the crumbling sky.

I shut my eyes tight as the huge chunks of rock crash onto our level. For a solid five minutes, the entire world is just a cacophony of noise and stray sprays of rock pelting me while Eneru continues to laugh to himself.

When the crashing finally stops, there’s a long moment of silence. Then I can hear the sounds of my friends shouting. “I NEARLY DIED!” I hear Zoro scream, followed closely by another loud crash.

I try twisting around to see them, but Eneru just tsks and zaps me.

There’s once again more crashing sounds and the same weird screaming sound that the snake made earlier. The screams turn joyful, then make a quick turn to devastated.

“What’s the meaning of this? What’s with the fuss, Ruler of the Sky?” Eneru complains. He tosses me none too gently onto the rooftop he had been sitting on, and I finally get a full view of where the snake is flailing. “You’ve always been an annoyance,” he spits.

I also get a full view as Eneru flings his hand out and an immensely bright flash blows above the snake's head, then swings his arm down and a collum of light slams down like the fucking Bifröst and all but cooks the poor fucker.

I gape at the sheer magnatude of that fucking hit. Eneru's hand suddenly snags in the back of my shirt and then we're airborne, dodging neatly out of the way of a bazooka shot from Wyper. Eneru whips out a dial from somewhere and then lands on the cloud ball it creates.

Eneru laughs, hefting me up over his shoulder (thankfully in the right direction this time), and starts spinning his staff with his free hand. "What an awful thing to do. And here I was, so kind to bring you to your homeland. Stay a while! The game isn't over yet!"

"Game?!" Wyper growls from below us.

"That's right, you and those behind you are the players," Eneru says with that dumb amused lilt. "It's all just amusement, a silly little game."

I see the exact moment my crewmates register me. "Ed," Zoro calls out, sounding confused, "I thought I saw you with this joker earlier, what the fuck is going on?"

I tense up in Eneru's arm. He starts fucking laughing again. "Yahahaha! Oh, it's good every time. This will probably be your last introduction to these people, so put on a show, hm?" He grins down at the group. "This is my prophet, I'm sure you're all acquainted."

"Prophet?" Gan Fall mumbles.

"How long has your rat friend been able to see the future?!" Wyper demands, spinning on my crewmates.

"Excellent question," Robin says in an unreadable tone.

“Ed you twat, what the actual shit are you doing?!” Zoro grits out, hands clenched tight over Kitetsu and Yubashiri’s handles.

Eneru is still fucking laughing. “This is rich, did you not *tell them?”* he asks, his ugly flavourless smile wide. “That’s so cute. You all seemed so close, but this is really all it took for you to betray them? I’m touched.”

“Are you getting blackmailed?!” Zoro shouts, eyes darting across my face for answers. I am once again cursing us for not having a secret communication system.

I scoff. “Seriously? I still have self respect you *toad* , and lots of it! I’m too sexy to get blackmailed!” I’m subverting future questions until I feel stable enough to lie my ass off. It’s much easier to twist words than it is to outright say false shit. Convincing Eneru is sapping my energy like a shitty portable charger.

Zoro’s face twists. “Well there goes any theory about an imposter. Only Ed is that much of bitch, even when kidnapped.” Aw. I’m honestly touched by that.

“Kidnapped?” Eneru snickers. Uh oh. “I haven’t kidnapped anybody. Your little ‘friend’ practically begged to come with me. They were all too eager to offer me their services.”

I consider the ramifications of just stabbing him with the seatsone here and now.

My face pinches in disgust. “Dude, you’re making it sound really weird. For the record, I am performing no sexual favours in this arrangement,” I clarify. That would just be… Eugh. Gross. Not even the sexual favours part, just the… with *him* part.

Eneru stares down at me for a second before disgust warps his face as well. “Ew.” He turns back to the group and straightens his expression. “Either way, your ex-crewmate is here of their own free will. I know, I know, the sting of betrayal is leaving you speechless. But as entertaining that painful little look on your faces is, we do have a game to wrap up.”

And sweet seas below, he's right. The looks on Zoro and Robin's faces are — Fuck. I — I didn't think this would be so *hard.* I'm used to looks of incredulity and exasperation on Zoro's face, but that still confused horrified thing he's wearing is downright painful.

To be honest he just looks hurt.

And Robin still has that fucking unreadable look, but I can see cracks in her face that very clearly look like fear.

Everyone else looks like they genuinely lost the fucken plot.

"Bah, why not spit out a prophecy before we finish things?" Eneru suggests in a tone that says it's not a suggestion at all.

My face is numb and my expression is carefully blank. "What do you want to know?" I ask, my tone flat.

Eneru hums. "First, a question. From the moment this little game started three hours ago, I wanted to see how many of the original eighty two would remain. I predicted there would be five survivors, but my prophet has kindly informed me of an error with that." His eyes flicker across my friends, then Wyper, then Gan Fall, then a chunk of wall I guess Nami is hiding behind. Then he looks to me. "You told me there would be six. So then why are there a total of seven, including myself and you?" he asks, gaze heavy and intense.

Aw crackerjack. "I hadn't thought to include myself," I admit.

"Then shall I put you in the fight? Do you think you can beat them?" he asks, gaze unwavering.

I tilt my head back and forth, considering. "No," I decide on, rolling the words around in my mouth. It would be a hard no any other time, but given how… offput… everyone looks, I could probably get in a couple lucky hits. Who am I kidding? "Yeah, fuck no."

He hums, eyes not leaving mine unblinking. "It's reprehensible for a prophet to make a false prophecy, let alone a God. So I guess that just leaves us at…" he slowly looks back to the group, "which of you two have to go." Everyone tenses immediately, me included. "Prophet," he continues, still looking at the group, "who shall fall first? Who will make space for you in my roster?"

I'm sure my face does something funny, since all the others do as well. "Make… space..?" I mumble.

"Who. Goes. First," Eneru repeats, his hand digging into my side and sending a surge of electricity through it.

I flinch and hiss at the sudden pain. "Gan Fall," I blurt. Surprise briefly flashes across said knight's face. "You say something that pisses him off and he tries to attack you."

His hand loosens and he pats my side in a mockery of comfort. "Good. Now then, who else will disappear? Will you fight amongst yourselves… Or shall I obliterate two of you?" he asks the group.

There's a long moment of silence across the group.

Zoro inclines his head towards Robin. "What's your call, Robin?"

Robin tilts her hat down. "I'm not going to kill anyone."

Zoro nods. "Me either."

“I’ll pass too,” Wyper spits.

“Seems I haven’t a choice. I absolutely refuse!” Gan Fall announces.

Everyone's heads turn back to the rock Eneru looked at. Nami’s head briefly pops out as she begins to shout something, before the group all turn back to Eneru with weapons raised.

“You’re the one who should disappear,” they all chorus.

Eneru is silent for a second. Then he chuckles. The chuckle builds until he’s full on laughing. I tense more under his arm the longer it goes on. Then he suddenly stops. He looks down at the group with condescension written into every muscle. “Bad choice.”

Aw shit here we go.

“No wonder you all made it so far. But do you have any idea who you’re speaking to? It seems none of you understand the true meaning of God! Yahahaha, an old relic wanting peace. A warrior blindly searching for his homeland. Blue Sea pirates hunting for gold. There’s much wrong with the world, so I don’t care what you want. This country is fundamentally flawed,” Eneru cackles.

“Enough of this! If you have time to yap, then tell me where the Divine Warriors are!” Gan Fall demands, pointing his lance at Eneru. “Just what are your intentions?!”

“Why, an ascension, Gan Fall,” Eneru drawls.

“What?! Ascension?!” Gan Fall asks, brow furrowed under his helmet.

“Yes. Once I ascend, I shall return to my rightful place. On the island where I was born, they tell of a place where God lives,” Eneru explains. “They call it Endless Vearth. The land there

stretches out farther than the eye can see! That is the paradise I seek! That is the land worthy of me!" he announces, head thrown back and arm spread.

"He means the moon," I add. Everyone's face twists in confusion.

"The moon? Is this guy fucking stupid?" Zoro grumbles.

"It's possible, and he is going to get there," I say truthfully.

Eneru's laughter gets louder. "Of course I will! I don't even need a prophecy for that, I am simply following the laws of nature! Land belongs where land belongs, humans belong where humans belong, and Gods belong where Gods belong! That is why I will drag all humans from the sky!"

Everyone makes sounds of shock and horror. "You're going to destroy the country?!" Gan Fall shouts.

"It's only natural," Eneru snorts.

"Don't overrate yourself! God is merely the title for the governor of this country!" Gan Fall continues.

"That was true until now," Eneru says, sticking a finger in his ear.

"THIS IS A WORLD OF HUMANS! THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS GOD!" Gan Fall screams, face twisted in rage.

Eneru's face twitches into a smirk. "Former God Gan Fall. You're worried for the Divine Warriors..? Since six years ago when I defeated all 650 of your followers, I've been caring for them." He hops off the cloud ball, landing softly on the ground and setting me on my feet. "Just this morning they finished the task I had assigned to them on this very island." He

snickers to himself like he thought of a particularly funny joke. “I wasn’t lying earlier when I said there were only seven people left on this island.” Gan Falls face drops and his lance begins to shake in his hands. “I didn’t kill them because I wanted to. When I explained my plan to them they rebelled against me!”

“They have families on Angel Island…” Gan Fall says hoarsely as the tip of his lance hits the ground.

Eneru shrugs, tossing me his staff. “True. But we’ll be burying their families soon too.”

That’s the last straw for him. “ARE YOU THE DEVIL?!” he screams, launching forward while sparks fly off the ground where the tip of his lance scrapes up for a lunge.

Eneru moves faster than I can see. One minute he’s just standing there, the next he’s right beside Gan Fall with a finger pointing down above his head and one pointing up from below.

Then Gan Fall is engulfed in white light. I swear to fucking god for a split second I can see his entire skeletal structure. My jaw once again drops at the sheer force of his powers and my knuckles go white against the golden staff.

There’s a long moment of silence following his attack.

“One more to go,” Eneru announces ominously.

“No!” I blurt before I can stop myself.

Everyone turns to me with varying emotions. “No?” Eneru drawls, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

“I — I’m not a genuine competitor! I’ve pretty much forfeit my spot, that makes your prediction of five survivors of the game true!” I spit in a panic.

Eneru doesn't look impressed, but he does look amused. It feels dangerous. "Oh? So you wish for me to spare the rest of them? I'm going to assume you know my plan." I nod slowly. "I will depart to Endless Vearth and take them with me," he reiterates. I nod again.

"What?!" Zoro asks incredulously.

"And if we refuse?" Robin inquires. All eyes turn to her.

"Why would you do that?" Eneru asks, sounding genuinely confused. "You'll simply fall to the ground with the rest of the country."

There's a tentative confidence in the line of Robin's brow. "It's true your power could do that. But would you not be destroying the things you want?"

Shit shit shit Robin is gonna get herself fried—

"Like the golden bell?" he responds breezily. "I already have an idea of where it is, and even then, I have my prophet to confirm it." Robin's expression drops. The bottom of my stomach goes with it. "You look surprised," Eneru observes. "Did you think that would work? Don't underestimate me."

"Wait!" I spit, a note of desperation creeping into my voice despite my best efforts not to let it. "What about my condition?!"

Eneru barely pauses at all. "I considered it. Request denied." My stomach turns to lead. He slowly raises a hand to point at Robin, electricity arcing off the limb. "You are shallow." Nami shouts Robin's name. My hands go so tight around Eneru's staff I can feel bruises form on my palms. "I despise conniving women," Eneru states.

Eneru sends a bolt of lightning right into Robin's head.

Robin’s white cowboy hat flies through the air. My feet are moving before I even realize, until Eneru’s hand in my face stops me. I scream, my throat feeling raw with the force of it.

“ROBIN!”

Chapter End Notes

Lmao. Oops. Ed really fucked this one up. My bb CANNOT catch a break.

Recently a college/university AU of this fic has been taking over my life so that may or may not be something that drops on my tumblr at some point.
(Message from the future; IT'S HERE NOW. GO CHECK IT OUT.)

Chapter 53: Chapter Fifty Three: Not Much I Can Change/I Surrender

Chapter Summary

Heat Lightning - Mitski

The world is folding in on itself and I can't move because my fucking friend is on the ground and *she's barely breathing oh my god I got her fucking* ***killed what have I done***
—

Chapter Notes

Couldn't pick which lyric to name this chapter so I just went with both *shrug*

You never realize just how much you hate the dark until you're using the Ten Candles TTRPG system and down to your last rapidly burning out candle. Anyways I got to wear a wedding dress and dress up like a sexy secretary so that was fun. And we only set off the smoke alarm three times! Halloween is fun.

On a completely random note, what's y'all's opinion on platonic smoochin'? You got capacity in your brains for non-romantic lip locking?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zoro's caught Robin's body before it even hits the ground. "How dare you," he all but growls.

"I do as I please," Eneru says condescendingly.

I didn't think I could possibly hate this man more. He rips his staff from my numb hands and shoots me a look I barely have the wherewithal to notice, let alone decipher.

I'm moving before I can even process what I'm doing. My eyes stay locked on Robin's body as I sprint across the makeshift battlefield. As me and Zoro cross paths I don't bother looking

his way, but out of the corner of my eye I can see him looking at me.

I skid to my knees beside Robin heedless of the loud clash of metal at my back. My hands hover hesitantly over her burnt shoulders, eyes darting across her face. Her eyes are rolled back into her skull and she's still faintly twitching through aftershocks.

"Robin?" I feel myself say. It sounds distant, like I'm listening from underwater.

That's probably not good.

My hands meet her charred skin. It barely feels real, like I'm wearing shitty latex gloves. "Robin, wake up," I shake her lightly. "Robin, this isn't funny." An explosion rocks the air behind me. I ignore it. Her head lolls to the side. "Robin, my blood pressure is rising at frightening speeds and I need you to *wake the fuck up before I lose it,"* I tell her, vocal chords trembling.

The world is folding in on itself and I can't move because my fucking friend is on the ground and *she's barely breathing oh my god I got her fucking* ***killed what have I done—***

Ironically, it's Zoro's blood curdling scream that breaks me from my panic. I'm of course immediately shoved right back into it because OH MY FUCKING GOD ZORO IS DYING TOO *WHAT THE FUCK—*

I whip my head around just as Eneru cracks his foot down on Zoro's head, forcing him into a bow. "For humans, death is their ultimate fear," he sneers. "That is why they bow their heads to the ground and beg for God's mercy!"

Zoro's eyes squint open on the ground, slowly rolling up to meet mine. I must look beyond horrified, because the only thing I can read off his charred and bloodied up face is reassurance. It just makes me feel worse, to be honest. Guilt eats at my gut like a fucking piranha.

Wyper suddenly flips in from out of fucking nowhere, grappling onto Eneru's front and slamming a palm into his clavicle. I can't really hear what he's saying over the rush of blood in my ears, but it makes Eneru panic so that's good.

My hearing clears in a moment of clarity as Wyper shouts out "REJECT!" and a concussive force blows out from his hand. The ensuing cloud of dust slams into my face and forces my eyes closed. I angle my body to keep the brunt of the blast away from Robin's still unmoving self.

When the dust clears, Zoro is standing beside me and Wyper is standing over Eneru's body. Crushing relief kisses my mind for a split second before doubt creeps in. There's no way that worked, right..? I can't remember if this is supposed to happen. Surely I didn't change anything to make this work..?

Oh shit wait—

"He can restart his heart!" I blurt, jolting forward while Nami comes running up behind me. "He's a walking damn defibrillator, unless you've still got seastone on him he'll—"

Lightning strikes down from the sky.

Eneru's body jerks as his heartbeat picks back up, loud thumps against the cage of his chest until he's rising like Christ on the third fucking day and is staring at the whole horrified lot of us looking deranged beyond his limit.

"People do not fear God," he declares, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth, "fear *is* God."

Wyper drops to his knees, energy completely spent on that last reject dial hit.

"I warned you, Warrior Wyper. I told you to stop," Eneru drawls.

Wyper hunches in on himself with a strangled noise of pain, his bandaged arm with the dial limp at his side. “Don’t…” he chokes out, “don’t use my name in vain!” He plants his other fist into the ground and sucks in a shaky breath. “The Shandorian warriors who fought to protect this city… We are their descendants! We vowed to avenge the great warrior Kalgara! For 400 years our people have yearned for this place! And I’ve finally reached it!” Wyper staggers to his feet, his sky skate things scraping along the stonework. “You’re the only thing that stands in my way,” he announces raggedly.

Eneru immediately strikes him down with his staff, destroying the skates in the process. It’s unceremonious in a way Wyper doesn’t deserve.

“What you did back there hurt, Wyper. You dared to use seastone. And using the reject dial just once would kill a normal person, I’m impressed you’re still even alive to struggle after two. But you picked the wrong opponent,” Eneru sighs, tapping his staff onto one of his taiko drums.

A giant fucking bird made of lightning pops out of it and flies right through Wyper.

That shocks Zoro into action. He sprints across the ground, swiping the broken skate off the ground as he does, and charges straight at Eneru.

“WAIT ZORO, FUCK, DON’T—” My shouting is proven worthless by Eneru tapping another one of his drums and a giant lightning wolf lunching out and taking down Zoro. He barely even screams this time, just makes this terrible choked breathy sound while his jaw locks closed.

Nami does scream though. “ZORO!”

I stare at Zoro’s shuddering body with a fierce numbness overtaking my bones. Eneru takes a single step towards me and Nami.

He stops when Wyper rises behind him. He doesn't bother turning and keeps his eyes on the middle distance. "Why do you even bother? You're going to die anyways, may as well go easy," he heaves a heavy sigh and glances back at Wyper. "You're just an eyesore. Why do you stand?"

Wyper is more blood and soot than man at this point. His eyes are rolled back and his tattoos are barely visible under all the blood. "For my ancestors!" he rasps.

Eneru rolls his eyes, the bastard. "I was hoping for a better answer than that. You're probably barely even conscious anymore." He raises his hand in the same manner he did with the giant snake, and once again that massive pillar of lightning rains down from the heavens and obliterates the centre of our makeshift battlefield.

The force is even worse than the reject blast. I throw myself over Robin as it hits us and we both go skidding back a couple feet. Zoro's unconscious body slams into the ground beside us and Nami yelps as she basically cartwheels behind me.

There's a long moment of eerie silence as the dust settles, and I lift my head to look into Nami's terrified eyes. "Ed..?" she whispers, voice hoarse.

My eyes disconnect from hers to meet Eneru's as he steps up behind her. "So it's just you two left, hm?"

Nami goes white in the face. She twists to face him and scrambles back until she bumps into my knee. She pulls in little gasping breaths that make her body tremble and rattle against mine.

I can't even make myself feel scared.

Nami sucks in a larger breath. "I — uh…" Eneru raises an eyebrow at her and her shoulders tense. "Please… uh, take me with you!" she squeaks. "I'll… go with you! T — to the world of dreams! Is… that okay?" she stutters out, shaking like a leaf.

Eneru throws his head back and laughs. The sound is deafening in the quiet of the abandoned city, and it makes Nami jolt hard against my leg. “Yahahaha! Fine then, come. That’s how it should be. Hearts that can’t be swayed by fear can be inconvenient.”

Then his eyes slowly trail to me. He takes a couple more steps towards us, Nami tensing harder and harder with every inch he traverses.

“Prophet,” he croons. “You haven’t changed your mind, have you?” He motions to my friends’ charred bodies with a lazy dismissive hand. I numbly shake my head. His grin sharpens. “Wonderful news! But, there is one thing…” The chill in my veins gets chillier, I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop. His eyes narrow even as the grin stays firmly in place. “I do have to ask, was what I saw back there a betrayal?”

And there’s the other fucking shoe.

“No, God,” I whisper.

Nami jolts again like she forgot I was right behind her. She twists and scrambles away from me like my knee burnt her and I’d be lying if I said even through the numb haze it doesn’t sting.

Eneru takes a few more steps until he passes Nami, crouching down so he’s face to face with me. I blink slowly up at him. His hand snaps out and latches into my hair, yanking my head upwards while he stares impassively.

“‘No, God?’ Is that the best you can do? If I recall correctly, and I do, you were perfectly fine with me killing every single person on this island. Are you going to change your mind for two insignificant worms and a condition that was, I repeat, conditional? So I ask again, was that little stunt back there betrayal?” he sneers, eyes curved into crescents.

Nami muffles a gasp behind her hand that I barely hear over the static invading my ears. A sharp tingle spreads through my skull and I can’t tell if it’s from the pain or Eneru himself. *“No, God,”* I repeat, my voice a squeezed hiss.

He stares for a long long long moment. Then he drops his hold on my hair with a smile. “Good, prophet,” he says, patting my head patronizingly. "If nothing else you somehow managed to keep the Shandorians and your Blue Sea dwellers from fighting each other in my battle royal. The Divine Warriors have had a lot of slack to pick up,” he says breezily, spinning on his heel.

I bite into my lip and pointedly ignore the stare I feel coming from Nami. I take a glance down at Robin and Zoro where they’re still on the ground. I brush Robin’s bangs out of her face, then rise to my feet to follow the false god.

“Are you really bringing that?” Eneru suddenly says. I blink and look up. Eneru is looking behind me and I turn to where Nami is dragging her waver upright.

Nami blinks wide eyes. “Oh — uh, no? I can leave it if that’s not ok!” she blurts out quickly.

Eneru shrugs. “You won’t need it where we’re going, but do as you please.” Then he continues walking.

I follow obediently as Nami starts rambling thank you’s behind.

_____

I don’t pay too much attention during the walk. I suppose it’s nice to get places with my own two feet again instead of being carried like a bag, but I’m not gonna push my luck.

“Ed,” Nami said quietly from my side. I jolt, not having noticed her falling into step with me. I blink over at her. “So a prophet, huh?” she says sarcastically.

I shrug. She frowns. I once again curse our dumbass crew not having a secret code. Fuck, I don’t remember enough morse code to blink this shit at her. Do they have morse code here? I

think I'm panicking, but the weird daze I'm in kinda makes it hard to tell. Am I in shock?

Nami comes to a sudden pause beside me. I do the same. We both look up and our jaws drop.

"Oh, that's much bigger in person," I deadpan.

The Ark Maxim is fucking massive. And not even in a funny way, the thing is just plain bonkers huge. And the ship is cool, don't get me wrong, it's just also buttfucking ugly. The damn thing has turbines, oars, and a giant golden face on it.

I'm not one to comment on tackiness, but good lord.

"Impressive, is it not?" Eneru says. We both turn to him with bewildered expressions. "I'm the only person in the world who can steer it, and it runs on lightning."

"How..?" Nami mumbles.

"Why, with a material that can channel my power. The gold I harvested from this land," Eneru explains.

Then he beckons with a hand and begins ascending up the ramp. Nami gapes at the sheer amount of gold we pass on the way, and it gets even worse when we reach his little throne thing.

"That girl from Angel Beach is causing trouble down on Angel Island…" Eneru mutters as he ascends to his throne, running a hand over the two weird ball-on-pole things in front of the honestly quite uncomfortable looking chair.

Nami jerks. "Conis?! But she should be on the ship!"

“There’s quite a few disturbances happening out there…” Eneru chuckles.

“Um — With your… Mantra..? Can you tell exactly who it is?” Nami asks hesitantly.

“Followup question: is Mantra teachable?” I pipe up. Eneru side eyes me. “I just ask because your general guys had it,” I add.

And because my bitchass wants to learn Haki and your psycho ass can teach me.

“It is,” he says carefully. “But learning such a skill from me would be a privilege that comes with time.” I inwardly groan. I’m not sticking around that long! “But yes, I can sense individuals. That skill is beyond most people, but not I,” he boasts.

“...Yes. You really are quite strong, God,” Nami praises, clearly lying through her teeth. At least, it’s clear to me. Eneru might be too much of a megalomaniac to pick up on that.

“I know,” Eneru agrees. “It’s why sheep like you two bow to me. It’s only natural for the strong to be above the weak.”

“Never bow to someone you could make kneel,” I say tonelessly.

Eneru gives me a long look. “You truly do seem like a person of great pride,” he says after a second.

“Do I?” I respond mildly.

“Usually those types are the hardest to bring to keel, I appreciate an exception,” he drawls. I slowly clench my fists.

“So you can really see everything..?” Nami questions slowly, eyes darting back and forth between me and Eneru. She looks vexed at the pride comment but unwilling to speak up about it.

Eneru nods, slouching back in his seat. “Not only that, with my powers I can tap into the electrical waves and listen in on conversations. The entire country is in my range!” he laughs. “It truly is a power befitting God. This will be the last act for Skypiea… The Last Supper of the angels in the sky!”

Was that a biblical reference? One Piece Jesus??

Eneru’s face suddenly stills. Nami tenses up beside me and her grip on the waver gets tight. “Is everything ok..?”

Eneru’s eyes shift off to the side and his brow furrows before he’s rising to his feet and descending the throne. “No… It’s nothing…”

We both watch him slowly cross the deck. Nami shoots me a ‘what the actual fuck’ look and I give her an ‘I’ve got no idea bro’ look back. Then she realizes she’s making faces at me specifically and scowls.

I flatten my face in a ‘don’t give me that shit’ look that she responds with a ‘I’m taking no shit from someone canoodling with a GOD’ look. I try to convey ‘I have a plan, nitwit. Stop fucking my shit up please’ through my eyebrows but hers furrow like she’s confused so I guess that fell flat. I settle for a ‘go with it’ look that she simply rolls her eyes at.

Non verbal communication is hard without a PRE ESTABLISHED SYSTEM. I’M NOT MAD. I’M NOT.

“Just as I thought,” Eneru suddenly pipes up. Both me and Nami snap up straight with matching confused sounds. “It’s not one of the survivors.” He plants a foot on the rail and stares down the side of the ship. “How irritating, it seems both of our prophecies were wrong.”

I blink twice at Nami. Nami blinks at me twice.

“ARE YOU THE ENERU GUY?!” a voice like a torch in a cave suddenly screams from over the edge.

Me and Nami both gape at each other before turning to the rail. “Luffy!” we shout in unison.

Luffy is standing on the ground, staring up at Eneru on the Maxim with fury in his eyes. He’s covered in grime of all sorts, his clothes are ripped to shit, and he’s missing his goddamn sandals, but he’s still the most beautiful person I’ve ever fucking seen.

“What did you do to my crew?” he demands.

“Watch your mouth, I’m God!” Eneru snaps.

“I don’t see anything godlike about you!” Luffy snarks back.

“Luffy be careful — !” Nami shouts, cutting herself off right at the end and shooting wide eyes at Eneru’s scathing glare.

“Nami! Ed! Are you guys ok?!” Luffy hollers up.

Nami hesitates, shooting me another look. “Erm — I’m fine!”

“I’m just — uh, here?” I offer.

"Ed! Robin said you put yourself between a rock and a hard place, whatever that means! She was really worried about you!" Luffy yells. Something untangles in my stomach and warmth fills its space.

Thank fucking god she's ok!

Wait, her bitchass is worried about me — I'm not the one who got struck down by lightning?!

"It seems the Skypieans have been informed of their doom. I wonder how far they'll get before the ground disappears under them?" Eneru muses, sending each of us sharp glares.

"And you call yourself a God?!" Luffy screams, taking off in a sprint up the side of the ship.

I push Nami back away from the two of them as Luffy swings himself up via one of the turbine things.

"I see. You're not a normal human being either, are you?" Eneru observes. "But… You're just a Paramythia! You're no match for me!"

"Poor dumb fucker," I commiserate as Luffy lunges at Eneru and Eneru gears up an attack.

"Which one?" Nami mutters, grabbing onto my arms.

"Is that even a question?" I respond dryly.

Eneru sets off his massive attack from earlier right at Luffy, blowing a massive burning crater into the stone wall behind the Maxim. Nami makes this aborted half scream before the dust is clearing and reveals Luffy standing there right as rain.

“Looks like you were able to dodge it!” Eneru sneers, spinning his staff and banging it on one of the drums.

“Dodge..?” Nami hisses, sending me an incredulous look. I shrug and give her a ‘this guy’s an idiot’ look.

A goddamned dragon made of lightning goes blasting out at Luffy and hits him dead on, not that he reacts to it at all. I can’t help the snort I let out, I really can’t.

Eneru makes a frustrated noise, then rockets towards Luffy for a more hands on attack that blasts out so far I shove Nami backwards and roll over top of her when it gets close. I also can’t help but laugh at the way her hair is sticking straight up.

“KNOCK IT OFF!” Luffy shouts, punching Eneru and sending him flying. He skids to a halt and there’s a long moment of silence between us. I break it by bursting out into hysterical laughter at the face Eneru is making.

He continues to make stupid faces as Luffy comes in and punches him again. “How the fuck did we get so lucky?” Nami chokes out, “to have our captain be rubber of all fucking things of all fucking times?”

I give her my best award winning smile. “You know what they say about D’s. They’re natural enemies of the gods!”

She gives me a both exasperated and dumbfounded look. “That tracks, you’re both fucking menaces. I guess that just makes you two perfectly suited for this fight, huh?”

I smile softly and shake my head. “I’m not fucking insulated against this dude like Luffy, it’s not my fight right now.”

Speaking of, Luffy is back at attacking Eneru, but the lightning bastard seems to have figured out he’s tangible to Luffy and is dodging all his attacks with his Mantra. Eneru suddenly goes

on the offensive, bashing into Luffy with his staff and getting him pinned up against the golden face by the neck.

“Don’t get cocky. Electrocution isn’t the only way of fighting if I know it won’t work,” he states, backing off when Luffy strikes out with a stretched arm. Luffy and Eneru land on opposite ends of the ship, breathing heavily and sizing each other up. Eneru holds his staff out in front of him and arcs of electricity dance up it as it molds into a trident.

“Now that’s just fucking cheating,” Nami grumbles.

Luffy leaps up and out of the way onto the face as Eneru takes a stab at him. “Just as I thought, sharp objects are your weakness!” Eneru says victoriously.

“That’s right!” Luffy yells back.

“Don’t tell him that!” me and Nami shout in unison.

Luffy jumps off of the face and starts falling towards Eneru, who suddenly isn’t there anymore. “He’s in the gold! He can travel through metal!” I yell.

“He’s behind you!” Aisa yells from below the ship. Oh what the fuck, I didn’t even notice she was here!

Indeed though, lightning shaped like Eneru comes morphing out of the golden face behind Luffy and goes right for a stab. It near misses Luffy by inches, and he immediately yelps when he grabs the trident. “Hot!” Luffy kicks a leg high up past Eneru then cracks it down hard on his head, sending him crashing into the deck.

“Right on,” me and Nami say in unison, fistbumping.

Luffy goes in for a barrage of punches, but Eneru grabs onto his arms and slams him into the deck, leaving him half embedded in the wood.

“Luffy!” Nami cries, jolting forward.

“You came at a bad time for a tour of Skypiea, Blue Sea man,” Eneru announces, walking back towards his throne. “I am God! Everything bends to my will! I am creating the world as I see fit!” He ascends up onto the raised platform. “I can’t let some random runt ruin my plans now. So what do you say… Want to watch it with me?” he offers, laughing when Luffy makes a confused noise. “The destruction of Skypiea!”

He slams his hands on the balls-on-poles things and channels his powers through them. Electricity arcs through several parts of the ship, weird sounds happen all around us, then suddenly the Ark starts shaking as we begin to lift into the air.

Rocks and debris start raining down as the Maxim breaks through the cave that was hiding it from view.

Luffy is still pushing himself up out of the hole and Nami is shaking like a leaf beside me. I keep my eyes on Eneru while he laughs like he’s already won.

“What do we do, Luffy?! We’re—” Nami starts screaming before she cuts herself off.

Luffy tosses his hat over at us and Nami catches it deftly between her fingers. “Quit worrying!” he orders. Nami starts stuttering so he keeps going. “You’re a crew member of the future King of the Pirates! Stop looking so pathetic!”

“King of the Pirates? In control of what kingdom?” Eneru inquires.

“King of the majestic oceans and seas of the world!” Luffy states.

“Interesting… How about we finish our business up here in the sky?” Eneru sneers.

We slowly tear through trees and rocks as the Ark lifts, the rumbling is incessant and my knees are starting to go numb where they meet the deck.

“The Ark's last act is primed and ready. I call it Deathpiea. It will rid this world of despair!” Eneru announces.

I make a face. “That is such a terrible name. Who the fuck let it be named that?”

The Ark suddenly groans, there’s weird metallic shuddering sounds from below before the top of the Ark is spewing forth dark clouds.

“Lightning clouds?!” Nami’s mouth drops open. “What?! But if he uses his powers on that giant cloud everything would—”

“That’s right!” Eneru interrupts. “When the clouds get big enough to envelope the entire country and I control the lightning inside them, it’ll annihilate the entire country!”

There’s a loud boom and crack from far far off to the side and Nami whips her head to it and back. “What did you just do?!”

“Just teasing the angels,” he laughs.

“Just because you’re a god doesn’t mean you can destroy everything!” Luffy shouts.

“Actually, it does,” Eneru says. “Now, I’ll need you to disappear!”

I kinda zone out as the fighting recommences. I'm gonna have to find a way off this Ark, and I don't think Nami's waver can carry all three of us. I'm not jumping off this bitch unless it's my absolute last resort, and we're way too high now to just get out of dodge.

"Ed! Pay attention, Luffy is being a fucking idiot again! Make him make sense!" Nami suddenly whines, shaking my shoulder.

When I look to where she's pointing, I see Luffy dodging all of Eneru's jabs with a goofy spaced out look on his face. "Did he—"

"He turned his fucking brain off!" she complains. "Just when I didn't think he could get stupider, he fucking *makes himself stupider on purpose!"* Luffy goes barreling past us towards the face and throne. "What the hell is he doing now?!"

What he's doing is sending a barrage of punches into the wall to make them deflect in a way Eneru can't follow. Which is great. Especially when Luffy follows it up with a hard punch to the gut and a massive hit that puts him on the fucking ground.

We all gape for a second. "He did it! But the Ark is still…" Nami murmurs.

The Ark is still flying because Eneru is still fucking alive, by the miracle of all miracles. "You fool. This is nothing…" he rasps. "I'll get rid of you, then I'll rule the world!" He rises to his feet as blood drips down his mouth. "Everyone will fear and worship me again! They will revere me..! You are… no match for me! I.. I am the omnipotent God!" He starts to spark. "Behold rubber man… Witness the despair of a falling island… No one can stop me now!"

"Fuck off!" Luffy screams, lunching forward for a punch.

I jolt forward as Eneru plunges his arms into the golden face behind himself. "Wait, Luffy! Remember he can control the gold—"

My warning doesn't fucking matter when Eneru molds and traps one of Luffy's hands in a giant ball of solid gold.

"Hot hot hot!" Luffy shouts, flailing on the ground and trying to recoil his hand to no avail.

"Fuck!" me and Nami shout.

Eneru takes a knee and coughs out a thick glob of blood. "Yahahaha! Gah — Rubber man from the — *gasp* — Blue Sea… *huff* — There's no need… for me to fight you," he gasps out.

"Lemme go you jerk!" Luffy shouts, trying to pry himself out and failing miserably.

"I can't risk you injuring me further in battle, so I think we'll just part ways here," Eneru announces. "This is your prize for a valiant effort."

Then he kicks the giant gold ball over the edge of the ship. Luffy blinks wide at us twice before he's being dragged across the deck.

"You can keep it — Augh!" Luffy slams into the rails with a punched out noise.

"Once I've disposed of you, everything will return to normal. There's no one left who can defeat me!" Eneru boasts, pushing himself to his feet.

"Nobody?!" Luffy snaps. "There's tons of people who can beat you! Down on the Blue Sea there's tons of men who are like monsters! You're just—"

Eneru hits Luffy over the edge. "You and the sky will fall together!" he snarls.

“You’re just a—” is all Luffy gets out before his arm goes taught.

Then he’s over the edge, and he’s gone.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when an average chapter of this fic would only barley push 3k? Yeah me too. Anyway this one is almost 5k because I am incapable of restraining myself. I would honest to god just do a like 10k chapter over longer update times but I plan this story out via the titles so I like to keep them shorter to keep it consistent with the lyrics. Like when I plan out plot points I just put my music on shuffle and when I hear a lyric that hits I add it to a note I have then give it a scene I envision it having then sort that by arc. So fun fact I have the names of 98 titled chapters planned and 42 titles without plans yet. I am... deranged. (That all spans from what I'm writing now to the end of Wano though so not nearly as bad as you'd think.)

In other news if you have have song recs I'd absolutely love them. I'm a slut for good music.

Chapter 54: Chapter Fifty Four: Sound Of The Drums Beating In My Heart

Chapter Summary

Thunderstruck - AC/DC

I'm not Nami. The sky and lightning are not my elements, and once again, I DO NOT HAVE A WEAPON. WHY DID I PUT MYSELF HERE. I could have just gone with Nami but *nooooooo* I just have to make everything TEN TIMES HARDER FOR MYSELF ALL THE TIME.

Chapter Notes

Could I have waited to use this song for Gear 5 because it fits so damn well? Yes. But I'm very impatient.

I feel like I didn't hype up this chapter enough but like... this is an absolute haymaker of a lore drop. At one point the plot is going to punch you square in the face and it's not going to stop bashing it in until it's done. Next chapter is chill crew bonding party bs but the one after that... oh boy. I'm vibrating in excitement. It's a chapter I've been daydreaming about since I first birthed this fic idea.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"LUFFY!" Nami screams out. I immediately shove her towards her waver. "Ed, what the fuck are you doing?! Luffy just fell!" Nami shrieks.

"Exactly! Go fucking save him!" I snap back, grabbing her hands and putting them on the steering thing.

"WHAT?! He'll kill me! Are you crazy!?" she cries, shaking like a leaf.

"Do you honestly believe I'd let him hurt you?!" I grunt, trying to shove the waver to get her to go.

She hesitates for a long moment. “You saw that guy! You can’t beat him!”

“STOP BEING A PUSSY AND GO! I CAN HANDLE MYSELF!” I roar, giving the waver a strong push that sends it skidding towards the rail Luffy went over.

Nami screams long and loud as she finally revs the waver up and rides directly at the edge of the ship. I follow right after her in a sprint, and when I see Eneru shift his focus from Luffy to her I don’t hesitate at all.

I throw myself between Nami and him as she goes careening off the edge with an incredibly loud scream.

“You think I won't hit you, prophet?” he sneers.

“You can’t get prophecies from a dead man!” I respond, planting my feet and meeting his eyes head on. “You won’t hit me with anything I can’t take!”

I mean, I fucking hope so. I’m pretty much winging this shit. Whatever semblance of a plan I had has gone straight off the rails. At the very least Nami is out of harm's way for the time being. Now It’s just down to uh — not dying.

Eneru laughs. Because he’s a piece of shit. “I can’t deny I don’t want to kill you. But your logic leaves quite a few flaws, the biggest being that I don’t need you in one piece.”

Haha. Name drop. Wait what—

“Dude I’m not telling you shit if you cook me?!” I screech, waving my hands around. “I’m not a ‘torture em’ till they break’ kinda guy!”

He huffs. “There’s your pride again. You’ll bend to fear one way or another, or were you hedging all your bets on the rat that just climbed aboard?”

I blink. Oh fuck! Sanji and Usopp came for Nami! Wait— “Did you say *rat?* Like just one?” I question.

He scowls at me. “If you’re going to be difficult, at least have the decency not to question me. *Yes, one rat.* Were you expecting more?”

“To be perfectly honest, yeah,” I admit.

He tilts his head left to right. “Hm. Seems there was a second rat, but he jumped off after your orange friend.” I swear to god if Sanji died trying to chase Nami because she was in a bikini I’m suing. “A pesky little rescue operation. But even with someone coming to rescue you…” he does a neat spin with his trident, “doesn’t mean you’ll be rescued.”

Shit shit shit. Alright, ok. New plan. Stay the fuck alive until whoever the fuck comes and saves my stupid ass. I am NOT making it out of here alone, we’re too goddamn high in the air to even entertain a solo escape. A little fucking terrible that I won’t be able to get close like I was before, but at least I’m alive.

I’m not Nami. The sky and lightning are not my elements, and once again, I DO NOT HAVE A WEAPON. WHY DID I PUT MYSELF HERE. I could have just gone with Nami but *noooooo* I just have to make everything TEN TIMES HARDER FOR MYSELF ALL THE TIME.

Oh god, oh god, improvising, improvising, what do I have… Alright. Desperate times call for desperate measures. “Fuck you!” I holler, ripping off my shoe and chucking it at his head.

My poor trusty combat boot bounces off his shoulder and he stares at it in disdain. Then he zaps it and it’s reduced to naught but the rubber outsole. My jaw drops. “Dude?! I’ve had those things for fucking years! You did *NOT* just incinerate that!” I cry. What an *asshole!*

“I’m bored. I’m putting you out of commission,” he drawls, pointing his staff at me like the barrel of a gun.

“No you!” a voice suddenly yells from left field. Then Eneru’s staff is blown off course by an explosive hitting the end. We both whip to the side where Usopp is poised in the door with his slingshot still out. “Ed! I’m here to save you!” he announces in a shaky voice.

I stare open mouthed at him for a second. “You’re literally the coolest person ever and I’ll love you until I die!” I wail.

His nervousness disappears like smoke in the wind. “I know! I’m just great, aren't I?! A true man amongst men, the bravest warrior on all the seas—”

“Enough of this!” Eneru bellows. We both immediately shut up. “You may be right, prophet. I can’t kill you, but I can most certainly kill him,” he hisses.

My blood turns to ice in my veins. “What?! No!” I shriek.

“I’m not ok with that!” Usopp yelps.

Eneru just spins his staff menacingly. “I could never be called unreasonable, so turnabout is fair play. I’ll give you an ultimatum,” he offers, staring me down with an intensity that makes me shake in my singular boot. “You kneel and beg for forgiveness, and his life, and I’ll let him go while you remain my prophet for the rest of time.”

Usopp’s face drops. “What’s the other option..?” he ventures, voice quiet.

Eneru shrugs, smirking like he knows for a fact I would never stoop so low. “You die and they still become my prophet for time immemorial. It’s really a win-win situation.”

Usopp scowls at him. “No it’s not! How dare you even—”

Usopp stops when I drop to my knees without hesitation. “Please forgive me, God. And please spare my friend's life,” I beg, clear as crystal with no room to misconstrue.

Both Eneru and Usopp look dumbfounded. “Why would you…” Usopp trails off.

“Pride is useless to me if I or my friends are dead,” I state. I bore my eyes hard into Usopp’s as he starts to shake. “Pride is of no use to the weak.”

The look on Usopp’s face clearly tells me he misinterpreted that statement. The look on Eneru’s says he very much did not.

“Seems I mischaracterized you,” Eneru says coolly. “If your pride is so useless, I have no need of it. Enough of this farce, we’re going to Endless Vearth. Are you with me, or against me?”

Of course this motherfucker wouldn't stick to his word.

I slowly rise to my feet. “Against,” I spit.

“So be it!” Eneru snaps, rearing his staff up. I lunge across the deck towards Usopp and tackle him through the door. That sends the pair of us both tumbling down the stairs that some lunatic thought would be perfect for right there in a tangle of limbs and screaming.

We land in a heap at the bottom and Usopp wastes no time in lugging me to my feet and pulling me further into the stomach of the ship. We pass gears and some weird tubes I don’t know the purpose of, until Usopp tugs us behind a huge gear and heaves a sigh.

“You know hiding is virtually useless, right?” I huff. “He can sense where we are.”

Usopp blinks. *"Fuck!* That's so broken, how the fuck—" he cuts himself off from further grumbling with a wheeze.

I raise an eyebrow and smother a smile. It's funny knowing he's going to have great Observation Haki one day.

"Ok, here's the plan," I start. Usopp nods with complete focus and seriousness. "We run for our lives and break shit along the way," I finish.

Usopp's face falls. "That's all you have?! Please say you're kidding and have more than that!"

"My plan went to shit the second I got snatched up by a Logia with a god complex," I admit. "Besides, my best plans are made on the fly! Being put in a tight spot like… fosters ingenuity or something. I'll be honest babe, I'm just trying not to have an anxiety attack right now."

He gives me a commiserating look. "Yeah. Me too."

"Good news, I have a trump card," I tell him, peeking around the corner.

"Trump card?" he parrots. I turn back and open my mouth to explain.

There's a loud boom behind us as a gear explodes. We both scream and dive across the little alcove we're in.

"Come out, little rats. I'd prefer we finish this quickly. Deathpiea is ready to be underway, I don't need you delaying me further," Eneru's voice rings from somewhere behind us. Me and Usopp exchange horrified looks, then both scramble to our feet and book it further into the ship.

The whole damn room smells like ozone and I'm fully feeling like I'm in an 80s thriller chase sequence. To be perfectly transparent, I'm not loving it. Usopp leads us behind this weird generator looking thingy then turns around to say something.

I see his face go white and immediately tackle him to the ground. There's a zap, crackle, then a boom as the generator fucking explodes.

"OHMYGODOHMYGODOHMYGOD—" Usopp screams into my face, grabbing me by the shoulders and rolling us across the floor behind some other big metal thing.

"This is kinda nostalgic!" I yell, helping to keep us rolling. "I mean — this is so much worse than Klaha-whatever on so many levels it's not even funny, but I appreciate the parallels!"

Usopp, still rolling, stares down at me with horrified incredulity. *"Parallels?! NOSTALGIA?!* We are going to *die!"*

I put us through one more roll so I'm on top. "We're not dead until we're dead! Besides, I'll tell you from experience it ain't all it's cracked up to be!" I yell, planting my only boot into the floor to stop our roll.

"WHAT DOES THAT *MEAN?!"* Usopp cries.

Something over top of us explodes. I somersault over Usopp's head and use the momentum and my grip on his shoulders to fucking toss him down the little metal staircase I didn't see behind us, then follow after him.

Then we're back on our feet and running. "It means we might be fucked but at least we're hot! Now let's do what our crew does best!" I holler.

He raises a desperate eyebrow. "And what's that?"

I grin and shove him down an alley between a couple gears and turn down a different one. “Make a huge fucking mess!”

“THAT’S REALLY NONSPECIFIC!” Usopp screams beyond me, slowly getting further as I assume he tilts into a sprint.

I turn a sharp corner, only skidding a little in my sock and freeze dead in my tracks. Eneru stands as the very end of a long pass between rapidly spinning gears. It’s fucking dark down here and all I can see is his outline as a light flickers behind him.

“Fuck no. Absolutely the fuck not,” I deadpan. This is right out of a horror movie and I am NOT HAVING IT.

I dart my eyes around the pass for an exit. “You’re making this so much harder on yourself than it has to be,” Eneru drawls. “Would serving as my prophet up on Endless Vearth really have been that bad?”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “Dude. You fried all my friends like eggs.” I spot a large unmoving gear I think I could climb like a staircase if Eneru doesn't fry *me* like an egg if I move.

He heaves a big dramatic sigh. “Why are you so sentimental?” Then he sweeps around his staff, still a trident, and points it at me. I take a chance and dash forwards, throwing myself up onto the gear with reckless abandon.

I just barely clear the top before I hear the hiss and crackle of lightning. I jump up onto my singular boot as the strike hits the gear, cursing Eneru and his hatred of shoes and my stupidity to get rid of one of my only goddamn insulators.

I single footedly jump from the gear up onto a grate platform thing and book it down the path away from the deranged psycho. I catch sight of Usopp running on a path that intersects with mine and wave my arm at him. “Usopp! Tag in!” I holler, sliding under and through his legs.

“OH MY GOD!” Usopp screams behind me. I peek back just in time to watch Usopp shoot an explosive at Eneru as he emerges from one of the gears. “FIGHTING IN HERE WAS SUCH A BAD IDEA!”

I cringe. “I hate to agree, but yeah!”

We both exchange looks. “Back to the deck it is!” we decide in unison.

Then it’s only a matter of running for our lives to the exit screaming bloody murder while Eneru rises like fucking Walmart Thor behind us.

Because the universe hates me, it picks this as the perfect time to trip me. Usopp, by the power of all that is good, catches me by the wrist and yanks me up the stairs before I can fall on my ass. Reaching the door we originally tumbled through is a short lived victory as Eneru approaches steadily behind.

“Usopp fucken run!” I yell, taking off across the deck. Usopp yelps and starts running the opposite direction. “NO I MEANT FOLLOW ME DAMNIT—”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up and I dive into a roll. The space behind me explodes in heat as Eneru strikes lightning directly where I was standing.

Oh he is definitely done playing nice with me. Fuck fuck fuck. There’s another sound crack behind me as I slide across the deck and nearly take Usopp out at the legs.

“Do you have a way off this fucking ship?!” I shriek, grabbing him by the hand and pulling him away from the weird glass tube thing.

“I stole these milky dial skate things off the feet of this guy — don’t ask, things got weird while you were gone — if you get on my back I might be able to get us down relatively unharmed!” he responds, dropping to the ground and taking me with him when Eneru shoots a bolt at the pair of us.

“Great amazing, let’s get the fuck outta dodge!” I holler, shoving him towards the edge of the deck. Usopp glances back at me over his shoulder and his face goes white. He slams his hands hard into my shoulders and sends me flying backwards right before a blast of lightning hits right in between us.

“Usopp!” I yell, scrambling to my feet. When the dust clears I can see him relatively unharmed except for a bump on his head from slamming into the rail in the aftermath of a flip.

“I’m fine!” he yells back.

“Not for long,” Eneru cackles, smacking his staff into a drum.

“FUCK GO GO GO!” I scream, sprinting across to Usopp. He shoves the skates on in record time, then holds his hand out. I do some crazy baseball shit and slide under the giant lightning wolf as it sparks past, then clasp his palm in mine.

He jumps up on the rail with me following right after. He jumps, and I go to follow. I see the second he realizes I’m not going to make it through his eyes.

Eneru’s staff slams hard into my ribs, and I lose my grip on Usopp as he tumbles over the side. I crash hard into the deck and roll a couple times before I skid to a stop. “ED!” I hear Usopp’s fading scream from over the edge.

The last dregs of my hope for a clean-ish escape die as I look up at Eneru. He regards me with a flat, just barely contained glare. “Too bad, so sad. Seems you aren’t going anywhere,” he snarls.

Then he takes a deep breath and seems to compose himself. I roll myself over and struggle up to my feet.

“It’s painfully obvious you never had any real loyalty to me,” he says in a bored tone. “You must think me blind, to not have seen how sickeningly devoted you are to your fellow Blue Sea dwellers.”

I slowly shake my head. “I think you blind in many ways, but I figured my loyalties would never be in question,” I say softly.

“Me? Blind?!” he snaps. “Me, who sees all on this island?! God himself?!”

“You have to be,” I continue, “to not see the goddamned hurricane headed your way.”

“What does that mean?” he demands.

I chuckled low in my throat. “I thought you saw all? Something out of your sight, oh mighty god? I’ll tell you a secret. I know no god that looks like you, and I don’t worship the wholly unworthy.”

In the split second it takes him to cast his hand out I’ve already ripped my seastone out and lunged for him. I swing out with all the force I can muster, I see his eyes go wide as I’m hit with the brunt of his attack. My muscles lock up and I feel blood spew from my nose and ears as pain erupts through my body, but it’s too late.

The residual force of my attack propels my seastone pin into the centre of his hand, and forces it back all the way to his opposite shoulder. There’s a sick squelch and crunch as the makeshift shiv pierces its way right through his palm into the meat of his shoulder.

Eneru makes a noise of pain and for the first time since he faced me in the forest I can see a small amount of fear directed at me through his eyes.

That’s great and all, but the last kick of his attack sends me exploding backwards and I slam hard into the deck. I convulse on the ground for a second before I struggle back upright. That fucking HURTS. What the FUCK.

“What was that?! What did you *do?!”* Eneru screams, skin going white as paper as his chest heaves and shoulders sag.

I spit a mouthful of blood onto the deck of his ship. “Stabbed you, *asshole,”* I snap back.

His eyes are wild as he pulls his hand off the spike in his shoulder. His blood sprays across the deck much like my own and he stares at it in disbelief. *“No,”* he hisses, bloodied hand coming up to cover an ear, *“why did everything start screaming?”*

I blink at him. “Screaming..?” What the fuck would be screaming? Wait, how did I even hit him? Shouldn’t his Mantra have let him know what I was doing? “You losing your godly touch, you fuckin’ fraud?” I taunt, smearing blood all across my cheek with the back of my hand.

His eyes flash and he growls, a near feral sound. “You would deny the power and status of a God?! You’ve seen firsthand what I can do, and you still don’t believe?!”

I blink some blurriness out of my eyes. Fuck, I may have burst a couple blood vessels. "I'm not religious anymore,” I say raggedly, “but even so, I would only worship one god."

Eneru bares his teeth at me like a cornered animal. "And who would that be?!"

I'm helpless against a laugh that bubbles from my core. "You want to know? Don’t worry! He’s already on his way!”

Eneru’s face gets red with rage. “WHO DO YOU SPEAK OF?!” he bellows, ripping my seastone out of his shoulder and hurling it over the side of the Ark.

I throw my head back and laugh as loud as I possibly can, jumping up on the rails and spreading my arms wide. “The Warrior of Liberation!”

Eneru's face freezes.

"Enough," he hisses.

Then he's rearing his hands up in the same way I saw when he took down the snake and Wyper. A column of pure lightning streaks down at me from the sky and I spend what may be my last second on this planet flipping this fucker the bird.

Every one of my muscles abruptly seizes. Agony lances up though my cells vibrating faster and faster, the pain is excruciating and it just keeps building and *building and I can't fucking* ***take it—***

For a second I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

For a second I'm staring up at white ceilings with a steady beeping of some kind.

For a second I'm in a void with a large hand holding mine.

For a second I'm on the shore of a glittering beach, laughter ringing from all directions.

For a second I'm staring into the smiling face of someone I love more than anything.

For a second—

I'm back where I'm supposed to be. I'm staring at Eneru, and I can feel my skin charred and flaking.

Eneru looks not only shocked I'm still alive and conscious, he looks so far beyond furious I'm shocked he hasn't imploded.

I can taste the electricity still on my tongue and I spread my lips wide. "I've seen the face of god," I croak, grin wide and full of menace, "and you don't look a thing like him."

Then I let myself fall off the Maxim.

It seems we had risen up past God's Shrine at this point, or at least the ruins of it, because I spot it as I fall.

I also spot Luffy, golden ball still attached to his hand and all, as he flies up towards me, seemingly headed for the Maxim.

My skin protests loudly as I hold up one of my hands. We exchange grins, and our palms connect soundly in a high five as we pass each other.

Your turn.

I continue to spiral down through the air, a new ease on my shoulders.

I, of course because I can only get so many lucky breaks at a time, miss the edge of the cloudy bank of the remnants of the shrine at this point. I think I hear Nami and Sanji scream behind me. Eh, it's fine.

The wind burns on my raw skin, I flip and turn with no discernible direction, my eyes sting with the rush of air. I freely let the tears fly out of my eyes, not putting any effort into finding an escape route. There's no reason to.

The sea is blue, the grass is green, Luffy will be King of the Pirates, and I am not going to fucking die here.

Everything levels for a second. I can see off in the distance the sun breaking through the clouds, beautiful and warm. I let my eyes slip closed and a smile grace my lips.

I let everything go black.

_____

I'm in a semi familiar fuzzy black nothing for a long moment.

"I can't tell if you're really bad at this, or really good at it," a voiceless voice calls out.

Hnrg. Am I having near death hallucinations of god again? This is starting to get old.

"Yeah, I'm gonna go with bad. If nothing else you sure are entertaining, Princeling!" the voice giggles.

Uuuuuuugh. I did not just get struck down from the heavens for this shit.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, you're not dead again, so there's that. Which is good! I think there's a gift up here waiting for you. I'd hate for you to miss it, he did leave it just for you."

Is being a confusing piece of shit just like… a staple passtime for divine figures?

"Dick," the voice says affectionately. "Oh, I think it's about to happen. You better wake up now Princeling, or you'll miss it."

Miss what?

The voice does not reply.

_____

I'm not sure what startles me awake, only that I'm suddenly awake and in a whole lot of fucking pain.

That doesn't really matter though. I throw myself upwards into a sitting position with my eyes locked on the sky as I get this… feeling in my chest. My heart pounds against my ribcage like it's trying to break out.

"Detective!" I hear Robin gasp, but it's muted and fades to the background.

Tears escape from my eyes and run down my cheeks. "Do you hear that?" I whisper.

"Hear what?" Robin asks, quiet and confused and more than a little worried.

"The Drums," I breathe in complete awe.

Suddenly the only thing I can hear is the singing croon of the Light of Shandora. The golden bell's lilting voice screams through the air announcing 'I'm here!' and I can't help the breathless laugh or the painfully wide smile that take over my face.

"What a gorgeous love song," I murmur as my vision starts to blacken around the edges. I feel Robin's hand land on my back and guide me back to the ground as the last of my energy flags.

"Yes," Robin whispers reverently. "Gorgeous indeed."

And that’s the last I hear before everything fades again.

Chapter End Notes

HAHAHAHAHHHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHA

Yeah, I had fun writing this.

Chapter 55: Chapter Fifty Five: I Don’t Know How I Survived

Chapter Summary

I Don’t Know How I Survived - Death Cab for Cutie

“Anyone got an ibuprofen?” I groan, trying to sit up and failing miserably. Literally none of my overtaxed muscles are working.

Chapter Notes

You know I love me my party chapters.

Speaking of chapters... next one's the big one. She's important. Lock in your theories now.

(Side note I absolutely love getting y'alls theories in the comments some of your brains are just *chefs kiss.* Sometimes you guess shit so correctly and got me giggling and kicking my feet and other times you say wildly incorrect things and I fall in love with you. Thems the breaks junior.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Awareness comes back in a slow stream before rushing in like a tidal wave. I blink my eyes open and take a slow look around. I’m still in the ruins, and I can see at least some of my crew scattered around. Zoro is up against a wall with Chopper fussing over him, Sanji is standing nearby Usopp sitting on a fallen pillar, and Robin is sitting beside me on the ground.

“Anyone got an ibuprofen?” I groan, trying to sit up and failing miserably. Literally none of my overtaxed muscles are working.

“ED!” a bunch of them scream.

“You’re ok!” Aisa, also standing around with us for some reason, cries in relief.

“Ed, my love, you’re awake!” Sanji wails.

“Quit screaming,” Zoro complains.

“Don’t be heartless!” Usopp scolds.

“Don’t move yet! You’re still injured!” Chopper orders.

I wince at the loud noise and groan again. “Calm the fuck down, nobody’s dead, yeah?” I mumble.

“Everyone is fine, so far we can tell. Miss navigator is with the Captain, so it’s fair to assume they’re both alright,” Robin answers.

I take a long moment to just stare at her, thankful she’s alive. When I finally get my limbs to respond properly, the first thing I do is throw myself at Robin. “I’m so sorry!” I wail. “I’m so glad you’re *okaaaaay!”*

She freezes for a long moment before hesitant hands hold me back. “Ah, yes. I’m fine. I was… quite worried about you. But it seems you’re fine as well,” she admits.

I pull back and blink at her. “Oh yeah. That reminds me, how the actual fuck am I alive? I kinda remember throwing myself off a ship hundreds of feet in the air, and that’s not normally something someone who isn’t Luffy bounces back from.”

Robin inclines her head to the side and I turn to see where Usopp is chugging down a huge cup of what might be coffee and Sanji is shaking rocks out of his shoe. “You’ll have to talk to Longnose and the cook about that one. They’re the ones who rescued you.”

I give Robin one last squeeze and relish the quiet surprise on her face before throwing myself at Usopp and Sanji. “You wonderful perfect men! You saved me!” I sing. Usopp yelps and

nearly drops his cup in his haste to catch me. Sanji screams as the arm I throw around his neck basically chokes him. I hiss as my everything lights up in pain. “Oh sweet mercy, remind me not to throw myself around! I hurt *everywhere!”*

Usopp scowls at me. “That’s what you get for pissing off a GOD!”

Sanji just bursts into tears, grabbing onto me in a ginger hug. “I’M SO GLAD YOU’RE ALIIIIVEEEE!”

“ED! I said stop moving! I’ll get back to you in a second!” Chopper screeches, trying to cow Zoro into medical treatment.

Wait, back to? I take a look down at myself for the first time since waking. I’m wrapped head to toe in bandages like a fucking mummy. Joy. That’ll explain why it was so hard to move. Robin is suddenly beside me guiding me to sit on the pillar beside Usopp. Sanji flits around before I wave him off.

“For the love of — treat that guy first!” Zoro snaps, gesturing to where Wyper’s body is slowly shuffling over here via a bunch of little feet on his back walking our way. I blink at that a couple times. “That’s… actually really disturbing,” Zoro admits. “Useful, but disturbing.”

“Thank you,” Robin replies, settling one of her hands on my shoulder. I reach up to hold onto it, like reminding myself she’s fine.

“All of his bones are smashed!” Chopper screeches, checking over Wyper. Honestly it’s not surprising, he *is* more bruise than dude right now.

Aisa ambles up to Chopper and fidgets with her hands for a moment. “Can you heal him..? Mister Raccoon?” Aisa mumbles.

“I’m not a raccoon!” Chopper snaps. “See!? Antlers! And yes, he’ll be fine!”

“So no one is in immediate danger anymore? Great. Ed, *what the actual fuck was going on back there?”* Zoro suddenly demands.

I tense up so fast mine and Robin’s hands knock into my ear. Everyones eyes are on me and I shift my own off to the side. “Well… um, how do I put this..?” I mumble. “I am willing to admit it was not my best thought out idea and backfired horribly, and I’m really sorry it went as far as it did.”

Zoro is just barely not glaring at me. “No shit. What the hell were you thinking? Better question, what the hell kind of plan even *was* that?”

I cringe and pick at my bandages. “Er — well sometimes you get cornered in the woods by a dude you absolutely cannot beat and in a moment of desperation decide flirting is the best possible way out..?” I say slowly.

I finally glance over at my crewmates, all of them in various states of disbelief and exasperation. “You’re kidding,” Usopp begs more than states.

“My poor beloved Ed, forced to flirt with a man to save their life… What cruel injustice…” Sanji weeps.

I nervously laugh. “Yeah, um. I told him he had nice pecs and he was gonna kill me so uuuuh…”

“And your dumbass thought lying about knowing the future was your second best bet?” Zoro guesses incredulously. “That’s dumb. *You’re* dumb.”

“Is it really that dumb if it worked?” Usopp pipes up.

Zoro frowns. “It was dumb. They’re lucky it worked out as well as it did. Ed, I'm aware talking out of your ass is what you’re good at, but leave the lying to Usopp.”

Usopp nods along. “Yeah, you’re encroaching on my job. Was he just saying what was happening and you repeated the information back to him? He seemed like the kind of guy who wouldn’t notice something like that.”

I shrug. “Pretty much.” Are these dudes literally creating a cover for me? I don’t even feel like I need it. I mean… would it be so bad if they knew? It’s not like I’m trying super hard to hide it.

“You’re not gonna get that lucky again, so don’t try it again,” Usopp instructs.

…Alright, I’ve decided. If they ever ask, I’ll tell them. If a single one of them ever asks why I know so much or if I’ve seen the future, I’ll be honest. But until then… they can draw their own conclusions. “You got it Usopp. I’ll leave the fiction to you.”

“Still a dumb plan. We’re not letting go of that,” Zoro repeats.

“Let’s all agree that was a fucking stupidass plan and none of us should never try some shit like that again. Cool? Cool,” I say quickly, face feeling hot. Why is this embarrassing?

“And the condition?” Robin inquires. I blink over at her. “He said he denied your condition. What was it?”

I scowl at the ground. “I asked him to leave you guys alone. Didn’t really work out, because every single one of us are stubborn jackasses, and he’s a lying prick.”

“You’re stupid,” Zoro says like it’s a fact. “You’re so beyond stupid.”

I glare over at him. “Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I did a big oopsie. At least *I* actually managed to stab the motherfucker.”

He does, laugh that is. “If I didn’t feel like I was being eaten alive by fire ants right now I’d come over there and punch you, so you’ll just have to imagine I’m doing it.” Then he stares me down with a deep intensity. “You fucking listen to me, First Mate. Don’t you dare ever assume we won't be able to handle a fight like that. Even if we can’t, give us the dignity of fighting for it anyway.”

I look at him for a long moment before smiling. “Alright, tough guy. From here on I’ll have full faith if not in your abilities, in your complete disregard for your own safety.”

Zoro squawks. “What does that mean, huh?!”

I burst out laughing, even though it makes my organs feel like they’re pushing against my stomach lining.

“Aisa,” a voice calls out from the forest. We all turn to the side to see Raki slowly limping her way towards us, one arm thrown over Kamakiri who appears to be leaning on her as much as she is on him. “Were you worried?” She holds up her bag with a bright smile. “I got your treasure!”

Aisa immediately bursts into tears and runs to meet them halfway. “I don’t care about that!” she wails, clinging onto Raki’s waist.

I smile faintly over at the reunion before both Raki and Kamakiri look over at me. I immediately freeze, guilt sinking down my stomach.

“You,” Raki says tonelessly. My shoulders tense up anew. I see Sanji take a step closer to me and Zoro’s hand starts to inch towards his swords before Raki continues. “I’m sorry for nearly shooting you earlier. I shouldn’t have fired in such close proximity.”

I blink rapidly at her, eyebrows furrowing. “Hah?”

Kamakiri speaks up this time. “Shandorians believe in fighting to the end, no matter the personal cost. But we understand self sacrifice in the form you used as well. We know you were just trying to protect your crew, however… poorly that went.”

I… what?

“We need to dispose of the remnants of Eneru’s army,” Raki continues, as if this isn’t confusing at all. “We’ll be leaving Wyper and Aisa in your hands for the time being.” She gently detaches Aisa from her, ruffles her hair under her hat thing, then the pair of them are limping back into the woods where there’s a whole horde of other Shandorians waiting.

I stare after them open mouthed long after they’ve departed. “What the fuck just happened?” I blurt. Every single one of my friends burst out laughing. “Stop laughing! What the actual fuck just happened?!” I squawk.

“HEEEEY!” Luffy’s voice suddenly yells from through the ruins. We all turn to see him, Nami and Conis running through the streets towards up with a giant sack.

“NAMI! CONIS! LUFFY!” everyone shouts.

“Where the hell did Nami get that sweatshirt?” I asks, still fucking confused.

“I’m so glad you’re all alright!” Conis wails, tears streaming down her face. “I was so worried, but I couldn’t do anything!”

“Conis! Did you miss me!” Sanji cries, spinning towards her as if he wasn’t also struck by lightning.

“Doubt it,” Usopp mutters, shuffling to his feet and helping me up when I tug on his sleeve.

“Are those provisions?” Zoro inquires.

“Yeah! We found where the vassal guys kept their food storage and took it all,” Luffy says proudly. Oh dear lord, food sounds amazing right now.

“By the way, Conis, your dad…” Zoro trails off.

Conis’s face falls. “He… I mean — he protected me… from Eneru, and…”

Everyone makes sounds of dismay. Wait — “Pagaya?” I ask, confused, turning to the man in question who is just suddenly miraculously standing beside me.

“YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD!” everyone screams.

“Excuse me for living!” he says, throwing his hands up. “I fell through the clouds into the lower level of the White Sea,” he explains, holding his arms out to catch Conis as she cries and throws herself at him. “And I wasn’t the only one down there. Many others ended up there during the evacuation. They’re all on their way to Upper Yard as we speak.”

“Yeesh. All’s well that ends well, I guess,” I mutter, looking at the ground, wiping my forehead and smiling.

I look back up when I see Nami’s feet approaching me. I give her a relieved smile. “I’m glad you’re ok, Nami. Was everything — FUCK!”

I’m cut off by Nami ruthlessly socking me in the jaw. “SHUT UP!” she snaps, face resolutely turned to the ground.

I grab my aching jaw, shocked. “Alright, I deserved that—”

“I SAID SHUT UP!” Nami repeats, then she looks up. She looks absolutely furious, as to be expected, but she’s also ugly crying. Then she throws herself at me and constricts me in a tight hug. “I was fucking worried about you!” she sobs into my neck.

I freeze for a long second before caving and holding her back just as tightly. I shove my face in her hair and let myself sink into it. “GROUP HUG!” Luffy suddenly yells, right before jumping onto Nami’s back and nearly taking us all to the ground. His rubbery arms wind tight around us both and I can’t help but smile.

“Not that this isn't like the best part of today, because it is, but can you please ease up just a bit? I kinda feel like I’m being embalmed,” I murmur.

Nami immediately yelps and jumps back, pulling Luffy with her. “Sorry! HEY, DON’T COLLAPSE—”

“Food,” I moan, “for the love of god, get me to the food.”

Listen, it isn’t top shelf gourmet Sanji-level cooking, but it is fucking food. And I spent the whole damn day getting carted around by a madman without a lunch break, so I’m beyond starving.

We tear into the giant sack of food like rabid animals, or at least me and Luffy do. I can’t speak for the classiness of the others, I have bigger priorities at the moment. Like sticking as many of these roll things in my mouth as I possibly can.

“Ed,” Luffy suddenly mumbles around a whole wheel of cheese. I turn to him without slowing in my meal. “I’m not gonna hitcha, because Nami already did, but don’t be dumb again,” he orders, one pinkie held out to me.

I smother a smile in my roll and hook my pinkie with his. “Aye, Captain. Won’t be dumb again.”

He nods resolutely, swallowing down the cheese wheel and choking on it. I smack him on the back until he manages to gulp it down.

It’s reached nightfall by the time we finish our makeshift feast.

“Should we go back to the ship now?” Nami asks.

Luffy and Usopp turn to her with disdain. “Did you hear that, Usopp?” he scoffs.

“Shame on you Nami,” Usopp admonishes.

I tsk. “It’s like you ladies never learn. We just won a fight, dumbass. You should know what that means!”

_____

Victory parties never get old. After the massive bonfire is lit, it’s like a damn beacon and soon enough every single Shandorian and Skypiean on the island is partying with us. It’s somehow even more raucous and high energy then our first party in these woods.

Someone, I couldn't tell you if I wanted to, had gone and grabbed a bunch of bottles of my schnapps from the ship (I think Chopper had yelled at me so loudly about not going off as injured and clumsy as I am someone felt bad and went for me) so the entire thing is worsened by the copious amounts of alcohol I consume.

As always, the entire thing is a spotty half remembered mess, probably made worse by the alcohol.

The entire celebration is four days of pure indulgence and joy, and absolutely worth the eleven bottle dent in my schnapps reserve.

———

“Sorry Ed, these are all I’ve got that’ll fit you,” Nami apologizes.

I stare down at the black vinyl kitten heels Nami has presented me with as a temporary solution to my shoe dilemma. “Um, you sure there’s no more… secure option?” I ask hesitantly.

“Yeah, no. I bought these a couple sizes too big by accident, so it’s pretty much your only option,” she sighs. “If the rest of these jokers didn’t wear the same damn shoes everyday or have feet twice your size you’d have better options.”

Goddamnit. “If I break an ankle tripping on something, you owe me,” I grumble, slipping them on. By some stretch of a miracle they fit perfectly, which only suits to further infuriate me. “I'd even take Sanji’s dumb steel toed dress shoes over these.”

“Like I said, you're out of options. Suck it up and wear the heels like a man,” Nami snaps.

I glare at her and take a few experimental steps. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve worn heels before. Much higher heels than this. But I’m way clumsier than I was before,” I grumble, jumping a couple times. “Ok I think I’m good,” I declare, planting my hands on my hips.

Nami gives me a doubtful look. “Of course you are.”

I huff and walk away.

“SHIT—”

_____

“Excuse me, Ed?” Aisa calls to me in the middle of a dance with Conis, who I spin over to Nami before exiting the makeshift dance floor.

I lean down so I can hear her over the sounds of the party and give her a bright smile. “Hey Aisa, what can I do for you?”

She brings one hand out from behind her back and scratches at her pink cheek. “Um — I wanted to give you something…”

I laugh and ruffle her hair. “Aw, you don’t have to get me a gift.”

Her lip juts out in a pout. “But — but you saved us and helped us back to our homeland!”

I give her a lopsided smile. “We didn’t help for your praise or admiration. We just did whatever the hell we wanted. There’s no thanks necessary when it comes to us.”

Her pout turns resolute. “Then I’m giving you these anyways! Because I want to!” she announces, thrusting her hand that was behind her back at me.

I blink down at it and the package it’s holding. “What’s this?”

She looks off to the side as her cheeks get pinker. “You said you liked sunflowers, so… I thought you might like some you could grow on your ship,” she mumbles.

My heart fucking melts. I snatch her up, packet of sunflower seeds and all, and twirl both of us back into the dance. She shrieks as she’s lifted but it soon turns into laughter.

“You’re literally the sweetest ever! This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me — Hey Sanji! Take some gift giving notes from this kid! She’s a natural!”

_____

“Wyper, real talk, how attached are you to that bazooka?” I ask, doing an incredibly shitty rendition of the dance to Micheal Jackson's Beat It from Just Dance. It’s especially shitty considering I can’t moonwalk on a good day, and definitely not in heels.

Wyper scowls at me. *“Very.* Why do you ask?”

I shrug good-naturedly. “I like cannons, dude. My last one got fucking destroyed by a friend of mine.”

He shuffled away from me ever so slightly. “You can’t touch mine,” he says defensively.

I scoot closer to him, a wide smile baring my teeth. “C’mon bestie, I stabbed the guy that fried you! One shot? Just one?” I beg.

Wyper takes off running away from me. I set off in a dead sprint after him. “STAY AWAY FROM MY BAZOOKA YOU LUNATIC!”

“LET ME FIRE IT ONCE *PLEASE—”*

_____

“Alright, alright, alright. I’ve got a question for you,” Zoro starts. I’m leaning up against him like a cat on a radiator, both of us halfway to plastered and taking a break from dancing

against a fallen pillar. “Why the fuck was flirting your first response when Eneru cornered you?”

It makes me burst out laughing, smooshing my face into the meat of his arm. “Ok — don’t laugh, it wasn’t that funny — you know how there’s fight or flight? Mine’s fawn. I complement things that scare me to throw ‘em off guard.”

He barks out a laugh anyway. “What? That’s so stupid! Does that actually work?”

I cackle “Yes! It, no shit, saved me from getting mugged once! I told the guy he had pretty eyes and it threw him off so hard my sister had time to catch up to me with her fucking pepper spray!”

“You think that could work for me? If I just start complimenting guys' eyes before we fight?” Zoro wheezes.

“Please, for the love of all that is good, do that somewhere I can see,” I beg.

We both dissolve into hysterics.

———

“Heeeeey, Usopp! Whatcha up to?” I laugh, nearly tripping and face planting into him on my way over. Stupid fuckin’ heels. He yelps as I plop onto the ground beside him and drop my head on his thigh.

“Careful! Yeesh, how much have you had to drink already? You smell like a distillery,” he complains, moving whatever he was working on away from me.

I hum. “Uhhh, two bottles. In addition to the two bottles I had a few hours ago. I don’t think you’re supposed to drink this stuff straight,” I snicker. “So what’re ya workin on?”

Usopp huffs. “Nothing if you keep squirming, be careful! This is delicate machinery!”

I furrow my brow and flip over so I can see what he’s doing. He’s sitting up against a chunk of rock he’s using as a makeshift table with a bunch of small dials, chunks of wood and metal, and my slightly disassembled pistol that I haven’t seen since before the fight.

“Didn’t Geppa have that?” I ask, leaning in closer to see what exactly has been done to it.

Right on that cue there’s a sudden influx of shouting behind us as the old man himself elbows some guy trying to stop him from moving in the face while hollering “I got hit in the foot, not the hand, lemme work damnit!” at the top of his lungs.

Usopp heaves a sigh. “This is the third time they’ve tried to drag him away. That old guy just won’t quit.” Then he turns back to me with a smirk. “We’re working on your guns. He’s teaching me how to integrate dials into machinery right now.”

I blink at him twice. *“Guns plural?”* I whisper reverently. *“I’m gonna get to dual wield?!”*

He snorts. “Didn’t think that would get you so excited. Yeah, He’s showing me how to modify one while I modify yours. So when we’re done, you’ll have two of the coolest pistols on the seas.”

I grab his face. “If I kiss you completely platonically on the lips right now would that upset you?”

He blinks a couple of times. “I don’t think so?”

“Amazing.”

Then I plant one on him. It's simple, nothing fancy, just a firm press then it's over. There's literally nothing remarkable about it besides Usopp's nose mushing into my cheek.

He blinks down at me slowly. "Alright. That happened."

I pat him on the cheek. "I love and appreciate you so very much and I would literally die for you. Thank you for saving my life and making me cool. We're besties for resties," I tell him sincerely.

That, unlike the kiss, makes his ears light up red. "Yeah, yeah. Get outta here before I decide to scrap this thing," he grumbles.

I throw my head back and laugh before getting up and dancing back into the crowd.

_____

"I'm just gonna go to the bathroom! I'm not gonna get lost!" I grumble, waving off Nami's concerns. "Seriously, stop acting like I'm anywhere near as bad as Zoro!"

"Fine, but if you get lost you have to forfeit at least half of your wealth to me, effective immediately," Nami demands.

I give her a flat look. "Not a chance in hell." Then I turn and saunter off further into the ruins to find a place to do my business.

I walk for a solid couple minutes to hopefully find somewhere that isn't part of ancient sacred ruins, because I would feel bad about pissing on ancient ruins, and I'm not having much luck.

"I can't fucking tell where the treeline is," I grumble under my breath, squinting up at the dark sky.

Of course, the second I take my eyes off the road, I trip over something and fall on my face. Stupid fuckin' *heels.*

"Son of a — What the fuck?" I grunt, pushing myself up and turning back to glare at wherever just ruined my night. A safe, half buried in the ground, appears to be the culprit. "Oh. Nevermind, I'm not mad anymore."

It takes a bit to dig the damn thing out, and it's more heavy than not, but once I've got it up and out of the ground I start jogging with it back to the party. It's not nearly as hard to get back when the sounds of it echo so loudly I wouldn't be surprised if they could hear it down on Jaya.

"Nami!" I holler into the crowd.

"What?" she calls back, slipping from a dance with Conis to look at me confused. "Tell me you didn't actually get lost and came back for directions."

"No! I need you to teach me how to bust open a safe!" I demand, dropping the box on the ground and pausing when it shatters the stone. "Yeesh, was that really that heavy?"

Nami's eyes light up. "If I teach you I get everything inside, right!?"

I scowl at her. "No, if you teach me you get the first pick of a singular item from inside. Nothing more, nothing less."

She heaves a sigh. "Two items and you have a deal." I give her a nod and we shake on it. "Alright. You wanna crack a safe? Let's crack a safe."

Unfortunately, it takes a significant amount of patience, good hearing, and fucking math to crack a safe. It takes forever to find out how many digits are in the combination before we

even get to figuring out the numbers. But eventually, we get the numbers and input them.

The door of the safe is heaved open by yours truly, and its contents removed and spread out by Nami. There's one of those golden bell ingot things, a deed of some kind, and what looks like a jewelry box.

"I don't suppose you'll let me claim the box as one item?" Nami asks hopefully.

"Absolutely not," I respond, flipping it open. Inside is mostly just earrings, ironically. Nami immediately snatches up a pair of turquoise earrings with a soft look on her face. "Those remind you of a certain princess?" I tease.

Nami's face goes bright red. "What?! No! Shut up!" she squeals, snatching up the bell ingot and pointedly turning to the side, though I still see her very obviously sizing up the rest of the loot and most likely already calculating its worth.

I sort through the rest of the jewelry leisurely. There's a weirdly large amount of pearl earrings in various styles I move to my mental 'to sell' box, I've just never been able to pull off pearls, and a smattering of other gemstone earrings.

"Nami, what kinda gem is this?" I inquire, holding up a green hoopy looking thing. My guess is some kinda jade, just because of how cloudy it is, but I'm no expert.

Nami barely glances at it. "Jade. That would look nice in your conch, maybe slip on that little chain there and connect it to your lobe."

I blink at her a couple times. "That's cute. You're good at this." The rest of it is nice but mostly just basic jewelry, lots of gold studs and hoops. "Aw, look! This one's a heart." I coo, holding up a labret bar. "I think I'm just gonna keep a few of these. You interested in anything else?"

She fiddles with the pair she took. "No. I'm fine."

I raise my eyebrow. Damn, that gay melancholic yearning must be out in force this evening if it’s enough to distract Nami of all people from free things. “If you say so. I’ll probably just sell the rest of this then.”

She hums lightly, plucking out her golden studs to slide in the new bling. “Thoughts, feelings, opinions?”

I snort, shoving the rest of the shit back into the safe and slamming it closed. “I think it’s time we get back to the party, nerd.”

She lets out a big over dramatic gasp. “Nerd? *Me?!* Why I never! How dare you, nerd!”

We both go cackling back into the festivities.

Chapter End Notes

There's so much to unpack here. First of all; the Usopp and Ed kiss came completely outta left field. I'm a huge sucker for platonic romance, if that makes sense. Like shit that should be romantic and just... isn't. I was literally writing the scene out without that planned in the slightest and then sudden I was like "Hmmm. Spice." and now here we are. Sometimes you get feelings too big and the only way to shove 'em out is to smooch. I would like to reiterate incase someone misinterprets this, again it's COMPLETELY PLATONIC. THEY AREN'T GONNA FALL IN LOVE. Thank you for your time.

This week on how much little shit that doesn't seem important but absolute is can I shove into the party chapter: sunflowers and heart shaped studs.

ALSO I MADE ART

Chapter 56: Chapter Fifty Six: I Traveled Each And Every Highway

Chapter Summary

My Way - Frank Sinatra

Luffy licks my hand and I make a disgusted noise before pulling it back. “But we gotta steal! We’re pirates!” Luffy half whines, half announces.

Chapter Notes

And thus we begin our 5k conclusion to the Skypiea saga (bar G8, does that technically count as part of the saga? In my notes I have it listed as part of the saga. But it *is* a wrap on the arc.)

This goes out to my Frank Sinatra girlies, I do it all for you.

On another note, I wrote one of the most heart wrenching scenes I've ever written yesterday so um. Yeah look forward to that. Only hint you get is Ace was involved and not dead lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I am very rudely awoken from my post-party alcohol coma by Nami screaming.

Actually, it’s a horrible combination of both Luffy and Nami screaming. They’re quickly joined by the rest of the Strawhats while I twist over to escape the pounding of my head. Who knew alcoholism would have actual consequences? Fucking ridiculous.

“IF YOU DON’T SHUT THE FUCK UP I’M GOING TO MAKE YOU REGRET EVER BEING BORN!” I howl, twisting back over and slamming my fists into the first people I can reach. I immediately follow that up by falling over and crying, because *ouchie my head.*

“ED YOU FUCKER—” Zoro starts squawking before he’s cut off by Sanji trying to kick him.

“BE QUIET MOSSHEAD ED NEEDS TO SLEEP—”

I cut him off by punching him hard across the face.

“I SAID SHUT UP!”

———

“So that’s what we’re doing,” Luffy explains cheerfully.

Yeah, it takes a hot minute for us to calm down, but apparently we’re stealing. So that’s cool.

“I mean, I don’t see why we can’t just like… take it with them knowing. It’s not like they really need it, it doesn’t hold the same value up here,” I groan, rubbing my temples. Chopper had given me some kinda something, but it’s much too slow acting for my tastes.

“Pshhhh. Ed, I thought you knew better than this,” Usopp says condescendingly.

I slap my hand over Luffy’s mouth before he can follow his lead on their stupid routine. “I’m not saying we don’t steal anything, because let's not kid ourselves I like money and we’re taking the money, I’m just saying we don’t have to proverbially dine and dash.”

Luffy licks my hand and I make a disgusted noise before pulling it back. “But we gotta steal! We’re pirates!” Luffy half whines, half announces.

I roll my eyes. “Fine. But like I said, they aren’t gonna be mad. It’s not like we have to run for our lives if they catch us.”

Luffy nods solemnly. “But we will anyway,” he says sagely.

I nod along. “But we will any — what? NO!”

_____

“Ed!” Aisa’s voice calls out to me.

I turn just in time for her to crash into my legs in a hug. I chuckle and bend down to hug her properly. “Yeesh, what’s gotten into you?”

She blinks up at me with a wide smile. “I already went to see Luffy and the others and said goodbye, but he said you went off with Robin and I wanted to give you a proper goodbye too before you left—”

I cut her off by laughing again, straightening up with her in my arms. “You really are too sweet. I’m gonna miss you, Aisa.”

Her cheeks burn a dark red. “Shaddup,” she grumbles. “M’not sweet, I’m super cool and badass.”

I snicker and use one arm to hold her up, the other coming up to poke her on the nose. “The two aren’t mutually exclusive. All my friends are super cool and sweet badasses. You take care of yourself up here, yeah?”

She nods determinedly. “Yeah! But only if you take care of yourself and everyone else too! And, ah… thank you,” she adds sincerely.

I give her a soft smile. “I told you you didn’t have to thank us.”

She shakes her head. “Not just for saving us. For — uh, what you said. Pretty much everything you said.” She just kinda pats her hands onto my cheeks. “Everything thinks you’re *so* cool.”

I blink at her a couple times. “Aisa,” I say softly, “can you tell me what everything sounds like?”

An uncontrollable smile ever so faintly peeks through Aisa’s mouth. “Like trumpets. Like a *procession.”*

My mouth tightens for a moment before I let it relax. I really don’t know what to make of that. “Alright. Thank you, Aisa,” I say quietly, placing her back on her feet.

She flashes me a blinding grin, gives me one more tight hug around the waist, then darts off down the streets. I stare after her for a second before turning my face up to Robin, who has been watching the whole exchange with varying expressions. Even with the heels she still towers almost a head taller than me.

“I do wonder what that’s about,” she murmurs.

“Mystery for another day,” I sigh. She hums lightly under her breath.

“They found the belfry! Go to the western shore!” a Shandorian yells, running past me and Robin.

“The belfry?” Robin mutters.

I knock my elbow into hers. “You wanna check that out next?”

The pair of us have been taking a sightseeing stroll through the ruins while the rest of our compatriots, minus Usopp who’s grabbing as many dials as he can, and Zoro who’s doing whatever it is Zoro does, go steal all the gold from the giant snake's stomach.

Robin hums. “I don’t see why not,” she says, aiming for nonchalant but missing by a nautical mile. She’s very clearly excited and I can’t keep myself from smiling.

Finding it isn’t exactly hard, we just follow the stream of Skypieans on their way to help and the incredibly loud grunts from the Shandorians already there. We arrive right as it’s being pulled over the edge and up onto the fallen stump of Giant Jack.

“Aw, one of the pillars broke,” someone murmurs near the back where we are.

“Look, it’s the Poneglyph!” someone near the front yells.

“This is the stone our ancestors risked their lives to protect?” someone else says.

“What does it say, Chief?” someone inquires.

“It’s an ancient text,” the Chief answers, and I have to stop myself from laughing as I follow Robin through the crowd. It’s fucking *Makarov.* “Impossible to read.”

“‘Hold the truth in your heart but keep your mouth silent,’” Robin recites. “‘We are the ones who weave history with the reverberations of the great bell.’”

The Chief whips around to us as we break through the crowd and make our way up to him. “How do you know those words?”

“They were inscribed on the ruins of Shandora. You are the guardians who’ve protected this through generations, correct?” she surmises. She walks right past him and up to the giant dark metal looking rock.

“You can actually read those letters..?” the Chief awes.

Robin stares up at it for a moment. “The ancient weapon named after a god, Poseidon. Its location is there too.” I stare up at Robin’s face while she bites her lip, clearly not pleased about its contents. “Another miss I guess,” she sighs, turning around to head back.

I catch her by the sleeve. “Not finished yet,” I say, pointing out the scribblings carved into the gold beside the Poneglyph itself.

She whips back around and her eyes go wide. “‘I hereby guide this document to the end. Gol D. Roger.’ The Pirate King?! On… on the sky island?! How did he know these letters?!” she gasps, getting closer and tracing along the carved edges.

“So it says Roger’s name?” Gan Fall inquires from behind us.

I squint at the moss near the bottom of the belfry. Why does that look..?

“Did you know him?” Robin asks behind me while I crouch down to get a closer look.

“It’s been more than twenty years since he came to this place. He was from the Blue Sea. His name is really there?” Gan Fall says.

“Yes. I don’t understand how he got here, but he definitely was,” Robin reiterates. “Well, there are two kinds of Poneglyphs… ones with information, and ones with the location of another. This stone is an information one. But then… ‘guide this document’...” she mumbles under her breath trailing off. She suddenly gasps behind me. “Could it — the Rio Poneglyph?!”

As she starts explaining things to the Chief, I start poking at the overgrowth. That's… not as solid as it should be. "So we no longer… have to fight anymore?" the Chief cries behind me. "Our ancestors' wish… was fulfilled?!"

I shove aside the weird patch of moss and make a triumphant noise. There really was some kinda hole down there! It seems someone hollowed out a section of the gold. I stick my hand in the recess and pull whatever is in there out.

"What's that you've found, Detective Domino?" Robin asks as I stand back up and turn to her.

"A dial," I respond, looking down at it with furrowed brows. Why would anyone leave this here?

"Ah. One of Roger's men left that tone dial there. Said he was leaving a message for someone," Gan Fall explains.

My brow furrows further. One of Roger's men..? "Well, it's been over twenty years. I don't suppose anyone will be mad if I open mail that old," I mumble. Then I press the apex of the shell.

A voice crackles through, unfamiliar but smooth. "This button here?"

I exchange a confused look with Robin.

Another voice, muffled by distance, replies. "Yup. You're live."

The first man chuckles. "Perfect! Ahem, pardon my vocal chords; a musician I am not."

And then he starts singing.

And my jaw fucking *drops*.

I stumble back into Robin, who catches me by my shoulders while I hug the shell to my chest.

“And now, the end is near. And so I face my final curtain,” the voice croons. A band strikes up in the background, a little clumsy but still so achingly familiar.

I can’t help it. Even as tears start pouring down my cheeks, I throw my head back and laugh.

“Detective? Are you alright? Is this a song you know?” Robin asks in her usual aloof tone, though genuine concern gleams though.

“I do! I do know it! This is a song from home! I’m not the only one!” I laugh hysterically.

The voice continues to sing and I lean back on Robin and grin. “Oh no, oh no not me, I did it my way!” I sing along softly.

Then the voice changes. A new singer enters, rougher and clearly not as familiar with the melody. “For what is a man? What has he got?” the new voice says, powerful and weirdly familiar.

The song comes to a grand end with the two voices singing in unison. “The wreckage shows I took the blows, and did it myyyyy waaaaay!”

As the outro plays there’s cheering and laughter from the two voices and a smattering of others.

I lean my head on Robin's shoulder with a watery smile. "Yes… it was my way…"

Then the last tone plays out and the cheering gets louder.

There's some sounds of movement as the shell seems to be picked up. "Ok, fuck off now Roger. I'm whispering secrets to this thing. You got your message, this is mine!"

My jaw drops anew. A choked sound escapes my throat and Robin gasps behind me.

The first voice speaks again. "Hey kid. You're probably a kid, right? Whatever. I'm sure you just had quite the adventure, so I'll keep this short." Oh my god oh my god oh my god — "I'm sure if all's well, we'll meet soon. Just wanted to leave this here for you."

"Holy mother of god…" I breathe.

"And… if it isn't too much trouble — Tell the kid, you know the one, his dad loves him. I know he won't leave something like this himself, the shit. I also know how little the chump must want to hear that… Bah, whatever. I'll see you later, kid. Keep your Strawhatted menace out of trouble, you hear?" Then there's a click as the recording ends.

There's a long moment of silence.

"That fucker didn't say his name!" I yell.

"What on earth was that?" Robin asks, voice sounding just a little shaky.

"That, ladies and gents, is the fucking reason Luffy knows the *fucking Macarena!"* I scream, shaking the shell. I whirl on Gan Fall. "WHAT IS THIS MOTHERFUCKERS NAME?!"

He shrugs a little helplessly. “I couldn’t tell you, I don’t recall. Names tend to muddle together when you reach my age.”

ONCE AGAIN I AM FOILED BY GERATRIC OLD MEN!

“Was he talking about you? How does he know about the Captain?” Robin rapid fire shoots off.

I tug at my hair with an incredulous laugh. “Fuck if I know! All I’ve got is that some motherfucker from my home has *been up here,* might be *famous down below,* and most importantly *knew I was coming!”*

Robin rubs her chin. “Hm. Seems the only real prophet in these parts left long before you arrived.”

Dear sweet mercy, there’s another poor fucker on this planet who got yote. There’s more than one isekai victim. That sorry son of a bitch was on *Gol D. fucking Roger’s crew.* Wait what if he’s already DEAD?!

“I should have asked for Crocus’s number,” I cry into my hands. Robin awkwardly pats me on the back.

“That aside,” the Chief suddenly says. “Your people wanted gold, did they not? You said it was more valuable than Vearth down on the Blue Sea. We can’t give you the bell, but how about the broken support?” he offers.

Me and Robin both blink at him. “I’m sure everyone would be thrilled at such a thing!” Robin says with a smile. “What say you, First Mate?”

“First Mate says that is a wonderful suggestion. I think I’ll go on ahead and let them know we’re gonna have some… excessively large cargo, see what we can do,” I grin. Oh we are fucking *getting* this gold.

Robin raises an eyebrow. “Hah. If you think that’s best.”

I give her a cheesy wink and a cheeky smile, then go back off the way we came to find my friends.

_____

I replay the dial two times over before I make it back.

Jesus Christ, has this fucker really been here this whole time? The implications that he anticipated my arrival enough to leave a message in and of itself is crazy. Furthermore, is he the Roger Pirate that left my spyglass with Crocus? WHY DIDN'T I ASK THAT OLD COOT MORE QUESTIONS?!

Eventually I make it back to where the giant snake is napping and a fraction of my crew is sitting around several sacks of presumably treasure. I go running the last few hundred feet and start waving my dial in the air.

“Hey guys! Me and Robin founds cool shit and also got us more treasure and also my entire worldview was just shattered but more importantly Sanji I got Frank Sinatra music you gotta listen sHIT—”

Yeah I trip and fall on my face. The stupid fucking heel of these stupid fucking shoes gets caught between two stones and that’s all she wrote.

My dial goes sailing through the air outta my hands and my heart freezes in my chest. I try scrambling up to catch it but it’s way too far for me to get to in time. Luckily, it’s not out of reach of Luffy’s rubbery hands.

I stumble up and over to him and gently take the shell back with shaking hands. “I think I just had a heart attack,” I whine, rubbing my cheek on it.

“Whassat?” Luffy asks, shoving his face close to mine to get a look.

“It’s a message from…” Uh. Hm. Good question. “My family? I guess?” I mutter.

Not my actual blood family, because that would be way too much of a coincidence, but if we’re the only two people from home on this pond of a planet, he might as well be family. Even if I don’t know his name.

“Family?” Zoro questions, looking perplexed. “I thought…” he trails off, looking off to the side with a wince.

I shrug helplessly. “Well, I mean he’s from where I’m from and we may well be the only ones kicking around, so he counts,” I say quietly. It’s kinda nice, knowing there’s someone like me out there. A little less lonely.

“Cool! Are we gonna get to meet him?” Luffy asks excitedly, swinging his arm over my shoulder.

I laugh. “I sure hope so! His ass said we’d meet up soon, so if he doesn’t show up I’ll go find him myself!”

“Anyway, what were you saying, Ed dearest? Something about cool shit and Frank Scimitara?” Sanji inquires.

I blink. “Frank *Sinatra.* He’s that singer I mentioned one time that I said you’d like. Fuck dude, I can’t belive I have this — oh you guys are gonna get so sick of this song,” I ramble.

“So… you found a recording of a song from your home,” Zoro interrupts to confirm.

I nod with a grin. “Hell yes I did! Oh! Also, they’re giving us a massive pillar of gold because we’re so cool. They wrapped it up and are on their way here with it right now.”

“So that giant thing over there that they’re caring isn’t a massive cannon? Good to know,” Usopp squeaks, pointing behind us.

We all turn. “Yeah, no. That’s solid gold,” I explain. “The real trick is gonna be seeing how much we can possibly get on the Merry without sinking her.”

Sanji lets out a high pitched hum. “Yeaaaah, I don’t even think half of that thing would fit on the ship. I’d be amazed if a *tenth* of it would.”

I nod slowly. “Alright, that only leaves one option.”

Everyone nods together. “Zoro, chop ‘er up!” me and Luffy order at the same time.

I shoot my Captain a look. “If you wanted to say it you could've just said so.”

He shrugs. “That’s less fun.”

Zoro heaves a sigh and unsheathes Wado as the group comes to a halt in front of us. “Hotdog or hamburger style?”

Me and Luffy give him matching exhausted looks. “It’s a pillar of gold ten times our size in width alone,” I point out in a tone that implies Zoro is a complete idiot.

“Yeah! You gotta slice it like the way Sanji cuts up carrots and cucumbers! Or like salami!” Luffy explains in his patented ‘you’re dumb’ tone.

Zoror heaves a second, much heavier sigh, then steps up to the pillar. “Whatever you jackasses say. Hey! Move that cloth outta the way!” he barks. The group scrambles to comply as fast as they can. Zoro lines up a foot or so along the barrel of the pillar and takes a deep breath.

With a loud grunt, he swings down. The stone past the pillar and under it shatters along his strike path, and there’s a loud ‘shing!’ sound as the gold gives way under his slash like a hot knife in butter.

Everyone takes a few giant steps back as the comparably thin slice of gold rolls slightly to the side of the pillar before falling flat on its face. It blows up a big cloud of dust and rubble as it flattens and we stare at it for a long second.

“So, that could have pancaked and killed someone, yeah? And none of us are gonna dwell on that? Cool. So uh, how are we gonna fit even that tiny bit on the ship? We gonna chop this bitch into tiny ingots?” I ramble.

“Shut up. I’m gonna cut it into chunks, shove it in a sack, and then your ass is carrying it back to the ship because this was your idea,” Zoro groans, gearing up for more slashes.

Me and Sanji end up shouting out scores for each of his cuts on a scale out of ten. Sanji is much harsher than I am. Even that small slice is too damn much gold for us to carry. As much as we possibly can is shoved into four separate comically large full-to-bursting bags, two of which get slung over my shoulders and nearly take me off my feet.

“Zoro you’re literally a bodybuilder. Take some of this *please,”* I wheeze. Shit man, this is heavy as *fuck.* Not to mention how shit my stability is with these FUCKING HEELS.

He scoffs and takes the remaining bags, and I’m vindicated a little by the tick in his forehead and the beads of sweat that roll down his face.

Once I get my shit together enough to not collapse the second I start moving, I tap my ankle against Luffy's and lean in close. "You still wanna run for our lives like they're chasing us for stealing?" I murmur down to him.

His entire face lights up. "Yeah. Yuhuh. Yes please," he babbles, frantically nodding his head.

I snicker and adjust my bags. "Then how's about we make a run for it before they really start trying to thank us?"

His mouth breaks into a blinding grin. "Really?"

I knock my skull into his. "Really really."

His smile turns mischievous. "Then I have a great idea." I raise an eyebrow. "I'm stealing one of your moves. HEY EVERYONE LOOK OVER THERE!" he suddenly screams, pointing behind the group of angels.

The entire group, including our own idiots, turn to look into the distance. Then Luffy starts hauling ass in the other direction fast as he can. The slapping of his sandals, I don't even know when he got those back, alerts the rest of the crew as to what's happening.

Maybe we really don't need that secret code, if the way we all follow our Captain's lead without explanation is any indication.

"WHY ARE WE RUNNING?! ARE WE GONNA DIE?!" Chopper wails.

Nevermind, communication is important.

I throw my head back and laugh as we book it through the ancient city towards our ship. I take a glance back and around at my companions and their grins and let warmth settle in my

stomach. Even Robin is smiling. *Really* smiling.

Then my heel catches again. “FUCK—”

———

“NAMI WE GOT MORE GOLD!” I scream as we finally make it back to the ship.

Nami’s head pokes over the rail and I can see the berri signs from here. “You did?!”

“Welcome back!” Conis calls, waving from where she and Pagaya are on their waver.

“Watch your head!” I yell, then call on the forces of whatever possessed me in Rainbase and overhead toss one of the sacks towards the deck.

Nami screams and dives out of the way as it crashes onto the deck beside her. “WHAT THE HELL?!” she bellows.

“ED! BE CAREFUL WITH THE MERRY!” Usopp howls from beside me.

“Sorry, sorry!” I laugh, hauling myself up onto the ship with my second bag. “That wasn’t cool of me. Is she ok?”

Nami glowers at me. “The ship is fine, but more importantly, *you almost flattened me!”* Then she grabs hold of the bag to drag it towards herself. It barely budges. “How fucking heavy is this? How strong are you?!”

I cock my head. “I dunno. Zoro won’t let me touch his weights because, and I quote, ‘these are my damn weights, they aren’t for amateurs.’ You’d think after I *smashed open a seastone*

cage he woulda changed his mind."

Zoro rolls his eyes and drops his two bags on the deck. "I want to make one thing clear. This gold is mine," he stresses. Nami opens her mouth, to argue no doubt, but Zoro bulldozes on. "This bag;" he points to the one on the right, "is to pay off my debt to you." Then he points to the one on the left and juts his chin out at me. "And this one is to pay off you."

Me and Nami both blink before looking at each other. "Can he do that?" Nami questions.

I shrug. "I really don't see why not?"

Nami hesitates for a long moment. "Well… he owes me over 400,000 berri. I'm taking what I'm owed out of that bag." She looks completely wrong-footed by Zoro being able to pay for things. It's actually really funny.

"And I'm owed a solid 79,000 berri. How much is gold worth these days? This shit is probably 24k, can't imagine gold here would be anything but pure," I mumble to myself, trying to figure how much of this shit I need to confiscate.

"Ah ah ah," Zoro says with this shit eating grin on his face. "About my debt to you, Ed. That's *minus 10,000 berri."*

I scowl at him. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Because, for the first time ever, you *lost a bet,"* he cackles.

"What?! When?!" I squawk, mentally running through everything I've said to this man ever. When the hell would I have — wait. *"No…"* I hiss, eyes wide.

"Yes," he hisses back. "You found a dial with music from your home. *I won."*

“Math and your gambling issues later. We need to get going,” Usopp orders, tossing a rope at me. I catch it in stiff fingers through the pure indignation.

“Yeah! Crew, pull out!” Luffy cheers.

———

“I think we should get a huge bronze statue!” Luffy announces.

“No way! We need more cannons! Like — at least ten!” Usopp rebuffs.

“Nami dearest, can we *please* have a fridge with a lock on it?” Sanji begs.

“I want books! Books about other countries' medicine!” Chopper requests.

“Booze,” Zoro simply states.

I tap my chin. “I think I’d like a bigger bed. Or more blankets. Or a more comfy chair.” Then I shudder and tap my foot on the deck. “Definitely new shoes.”

Robin watches from her perch on the stairs with an indulgent smile on her face.

Nami grabs Chopper by the face and frowns at us. “Slow your roll. We’ll figure out how we divvy up the rest of the treasure once we get down from here. Maybe curb your enthusiasm and practicalize your wishlists.”

“Books,” Chopper whines through a pinched mouth. Usopp and Luffy continue dancing around heedless of Nami’s exhausted sigh.

“Guys look! Clouds End has come into view!” Conis calls below from where she and Pagaya are following us in their little waver ship thing.

We all turn our gazes to the front of the ship, where we’re approaching the large weird looking gate thing that signifies a definitive end to our sky adventures.

Luffy sprints up to the figurehead and splays himself across Merry’s head. “Awww, do we really have to go already?” he complains miserably.

I snicker and lean my crossed arms on the rail. “But aren’t you excited for what we’ll find next on the Grand Line, Captain?”

Luffy perks up immediately. “You’re right! I wonder where we’ll go next? Maybe there’ll be an island made of meat!”

“One can only hope,” I muse.

“The sky island was fun. Scary, but fun,” Chopper decides.

“I’m a little sad it’s over too,” Sanji says, rolling his cigarette around between his teeth.

As we sail up into the gate Pagaya and Conis’s vessel docks onto the raised pathway. “So once we pass that gate we just take a milky road down to the Blue Sea, huh?” Usopp states. I snicker quietly to myself.

Nami fiddles with the zipper on her shirt. “Do you think we’ll be able to come back? For the rest of the gold I mean.”

“Who knows,” Usopp shrugs.

Conis and her father run alongside the ship from the path. “It’s been great, but this is as far as we go!” Pagaya calls.

“Take care everyone!” Conis cries with a wide smile.

“Thanks for seeing us off!” Nami calls back.

“Thanks for everything!” Usopp corrects.

“Take care of yourself Conis!” Sanji sings.

“It’s been real! Bye now!” I call down with a wide smile.

“Conis and old guy and white thing, take care!” Luffy cheers.

“You too! Now furl your sail and hold on tight!” Pagaya advises.

We all bust into action to follow his orders. “Do as the man says! Looks like we’ll be going pretty fast, we’re five miles up so it’s gotta be a steep slope!” Usopp calls out.

“About that—” I start, but am cut off by the horrendous sound of the South Bird we accidentally brought up here crashing into Luffy with a scream.

“He says ‘don’t leave without me!’” Chopper translates.

“Oh, oops. I forgot about that,” Nami chuckles. Then she holds up her wrist to check out the Log Pose. “Alright, Captain! Our course is set for the next island!”

“Yeah! Once we get down from here, our next adventure can start!” he announces as we sail through the gate and start speeding up along the milky road. “Alright! Let’s go back to the Blue Sea!”

“YEAH!” we all chorus back.

“Be careful on the drop!” Conis yells from behind us. I grab onto the rail and clamp my other hand onto Chopper.

“Drop..?” Usopp mumbles.

Then we’re in the air.

Everyone's eyes pop out of their skulls. Like, literally. It’s bizarre.

“Heso!” Conis calls cheerfully from her safe perch on solid ground.

We all start screaming. To be perfectly candid, this is terrifying. But I’m honest to god more laughing than screaming. Chopper is clinging to my hand for dear life and Zoro looks like he’s about to start swimming through the air to strangle me.

Then the giant octopus bursts from the bank of clouds and wraps around our ship. Everyone's eyes return to their sockets and the screaming gets louder, Zoro going for his swords before our ship jerks to a slower speed and puts him on his ass.

“This is awesome!” Luffy cackles as we all stare up at our octopus balloon.

“We’ve stopped falling,” Nami observes, rubbing her back where it slammed into the deck.

“I thought we were gonna die…” Usopp whimpers, facedown on the ground.

I throw my head back and laugh, trying to pry Chopper off my front. The absurdity of this world never fails to amaze me.

Everything freezes for a second as the sound of the golden bell chimes though the sky. This adventure might not have gone as smooth as I hoped, but the vibrating hymn of Shandora fills the air and any unease about the trip soothes.

“Hey, this is nice! What a great feeling,” Luffy laughs.

I duck my head and smile.

Chapter End Notes

I tread a fine line between this being a songfic, but by god do I have good balance.

Huge shoutout to everyone who guessed this little plot point back in CHAPTER 22. Y'all were seeing the vision with a magnifying glass and I respect that. Also props to everyone who has figured it out since then, y'all are just as cool and smart. Now just figure out the fuckers name lmao.

Chapter 57: Chapter Fifty Seven: I'll Find My Way To You

Chapter Summary

Through and Through - khai dreams

"Let me get this straight, you want to make up a secret code with hand gestures?" Nami sighs, rubbing between her brows.

Chapter Notes

This bad boy is a little shorter then I've been doing lately, but it's sweet and fun so whatever.

I'm gonna go visit my grandma right after I post this to learn all about her life so pray for me that she doesn't hit me with some absolutely batshit Family Lore™.

(She did. She did hit me with bathshit Family Lore™.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Let me get this straight, you want to make up a secret code with hand gestures?" Nami sighs, rubbing between her brows.

I nod, taking a sip from my tea. "Yup. If we're ever in a situation like what happened up there again, this could quite literally save our lives."

It's a damn shame I never picked up sign language, because that would probably make this easier.

I've gathered up everyone in the galley to kill a little of our ample drop time devising a code system. Everyone has finally had a chance to change out of their destroyed clothes and I tug idly at the hem of my yellow crop top and think about just how much clothing we obliterate on the regular.

“It’s actually a great idea,” Usopp admits.

“Of course it is, Ed came up with it,” Sanji says matter of factly.

I flick him on the cheek. “Careful love, you’re gonna give me a big head.”

While he swoons Zoro rolls his eyes from where he’s leaning against the wall. “Do you have any suggestions for gestures and what they mean?”

I nod. “Having a lying/no code is a good place to start. How’s this;” I pinch my nose. “It’s recognizable but subtle. Thoughts?”

There’s a couple nods and a few people copying the gesture. Sanji pinches his nose then snorts. “Simple enough. Even the mosshead will remember this. Shall I suggest a truth/yes option then? Something like this,” he presses his thumbnail to his chin.

I smile. “Good. Is someone writing these down?”

Nami nods, not looking up from the paper I didn’t notice her taking out.

“Any demand for a hit me motion?” Zoro pipes up. Then he taps a fist on his collarbone. “This is straightforward enough.”

Sanji scoffs. “What would we need that for?”

“Actually that’s a good one. In addition to that, let’s do a go with it one,” I suggest. I close my hand and tap my thumbnail to my lips. “So if, god forbid, one of us does something like what I did we all know to not fuck with their plan.”

“We should have a received code as well, to make sure we know if our code is understood,” Robin adds. Then she taps a finger to her temple.

Nami writes it down dutifully then puts down her pen. “We need a treasure code,” she demands.

Usopp runs his thumb up his fingers in a mockery of a cash motion. “This good enough for you?”

Nami nods, satisfied. We run through a few more codes and gestures, Luffy only injecting or paying attention to suggest a food code (we cave, it’s double tapping an open hand to your mouth) before the group is satisfied with the versatility. We even go through and give each of us a personalized code for referring to each other.

“And the last and most important code of them all,” I announce, standing up to give it the proper efficacy, “the Fake Marriage Go! code!”

I’m met with incredulous and exhausted looks.

“Why the fuck would we ever need that?” Usopp groans.

I glare down at him until he shrinks back. Then I go back to my bright smile. “Something simple like this should suffice!” I tug on my ring finger as a demonstration. That is met with reluctant nods and it being added to our list. I clap. “Wonderful and productive meeting, team! You’re free to go. Oh, except you Usopp. We have business,” I say with an evil smirk.

Usopp gulps and shifts on the bench while everyone else snickers and gets up to leave, shooting him pitying looks along the way. “Uh… What’s this about..?” he asks nervously.

I slam my palms into the table and he yelps. “Hand them over, sailor! I want my damn guns!” I shout, stars in my eyes.

He blinks twice before deflating. “Are you kidding? You freak me out for *that?”*

I let out an offended gasp. “Don’t say that like this isn't the most important thing to happen ever. Show me the goods, good lookin’!”

He throws his head back and laughs. Then he’s reaching into his bag and places two pistols on the table, along with a gun belt, complete with two holsters. I look them both over quickly, noting how different they look both to my original. Aw, the cock/flint holding thingies looks like little dragons, how cute.

He pushes one forward first. “This one is the one Geppa worked on. We modified both so they would be closer in style, so your original doesn't have the same grip or handle shape anymore.” He lifts it up to show it off better. “This one’s a left handed gun, so you’ll be wielding it with your off hand. It’s got two dials in it, same as the other. Wanna guess which ones?”

“No the fuck I don’t! I’m not doing my job in my own home, you tell me!” I babble, all but vibrating in my seat.

The jackass just laughs. “Alright, alright. This one right here is a flame dial, and the other further down the barrel is a flavour dial. Do you get the picture?” he explains, pointing to the two ring-like things around the barrel. “Store up some gas in the flavour dial, then…” He mimes an explosion.

I muffle a sob into my hands. “I love you so much.”

Usopp smirks. “And I’m only halfway through.” He holds up the second gun. “This is your original pistol, so you can see the differences clearly. The barrel is a little longer, we had to replace it because of the fucking mess you made of it. I’d advise against ever shooting with whatever you shot again.”

My cheeks burn and I frown. Guess my seastone bullet really *was* that bad. Then I perk up. “And the dials on this one?”

He laughs haughtily. “This weapon is my pièce de résistance. My magnum opus, my greatest accomplishment — until I finish what I’m working on now at least. Now, I wanted to take this weapon in a different direction than the other. While the first one is perfectly suited for long distance combat and AOE attacks, this baby is a whole different speed.” He points to the barrel. “This bad boy is reinforced and made to parry. You may be thinking, ‘Usopp why the fuck would I want to do that?’ Well I will explain. This dial here;” he points to the dial near the end of the barrel, “is an impact dial.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “It can handle that? With the backlash from the dial and everything?”

He nods smugly. “Yes it can. More than that, because of the recoil when you fire, not only will the dial store up any force when you hit things or parry with it, it’ll intake ambient force when you shoot with it. The second dial is the interesting part.”

I slap the table repeatedly. “Tell me tell me tell me—” I chant.

Usopp stands up and plants one foot on the bench, holding the gun up like a microphone. “Drumroll, ladies and Ed’s, for the last dial of this epic dual pistol combo is… AN AXE DIAL!”

I blink at him. “How does that work?”

He blinks back. “Remember how this is a parrying weapon?” I nod. “If a guy with a sword is attacking you it’ll absorb the slashes. And from there…”

My jaw drops. “You didn’t.”

He smirks. “Oh but I did. This thing shoots *flying slashes*. Because it’s objectively the funniest thing I could do.” I slam my head into the table. “...Are you ok?” Usopp asks after a

second.

I hold one finger up. “Gimme a minute, I think I just reached Nirvana and saw into the centre of the cosmos. Love is the one universal truth,” I say, muffled into the table.

There’s a long moment of silence. “...That’s good, right?” he asks hesitantly.

I bolt upwards and lean across the table in one smooth moment, grabbing him by the overalls and pulling until we’re nose to nose. “You are the wind beneath my wings.”

He looks completely nonplussed. “...That didn’t answer my question at all…” he stutters out.

I kiss him on the nose. “Your services are more than appreciated.” Then I swipe the pistols from the table and sprint out the door. “ZORO I NEED YOU TO TRY AND CUT ME IN HALF FOR SCIENTIFIC REASONS—”

———

“Do you think we’re low enough altitude now for Transponders to work?” I ask in the midst of running in circles around the mast to escape Chopper’s doctorly whims.

“Ed stop running I need to make sure your wrist isn’t sprained!” he screeches, running as fast as his little legs can take him behind me, a roll of bandages brandished menacingly in his hooves.

“Based on the rate of our descent, I really couldn’t tell you. But I’d give it fair chances,” Nami answers from where she’s relaxing in a foldable chair enjoying the cooling air as we near evening.

I stop running and jump over Chopper when he can’t skid to a stop fast enough. “Great! Do you think News Coo’s reach this high?”

Nami hums low in her throat. “Dunno. Doubtful.”

“ED! STOP MOVING!” Chopper screams, tackling me at the knees.

I go down hard, just barely catching myself so as to not crush our tiny doctor. “Good Jesus, Chopper! Be careful, someone could get hurt!”

He muffles a scream. “As your doctor I’m recommending you refrain from using the full capabilities of that pistol!” he orders.

I heave a sigh. “C’mon Chopper! What use is a badass weapon if I can’t use it? And it only fucked me up a little!”

Alright, that’s an understatement. It did hurt quite a bit.

The friendly sparring between me and Zoro had been cut extremely short after my own weapon nearly took me out of commission. It had been going great, my right pistol had been able to absorb the force behind all of Zoro’s hits, and the slashes from his sword. Which by the way, fucking crazy. My brain physically refuses to compute how it works.

Firing them had been ever crazier. Most awesome shit to happen this week. It was great right up until I tried to use the impact dial with all the built up force and it sent me almost shooting off the side of the deck. Let’s just say it’s gonna be a strictly off-ship weapon.

“But you said it hurt!” Chopper whines.

“Chops, I simply don’t care. My other wrist has been clicking since my fight with Bon anyway! I’m even now!” I cackle enthusiastically.

“NOOOOOO!” Chopper screams, clinging onto me and crying.

“Ed. Stop taunting Chopper,” Nami scolds, stretching her legs out and cracking her neck.

“I’m not taunting anybody!” I whine, prying Chopper off my front to sling him over my shoulders. “How about this, I promise to only use that as a last resort, and if I ever break my wrist because of it you can yell at me then.”

Chopper grumbles into my hair. “It shouldn’t even get that far…”

“Anywho—” I start, then cut myself off. Something slinks in the back of my mind and I’m suddenly on the lookout for my Captain. “...Has anyone seen Luffy lately..?”

Dude, if I’m developing a sixth sense for Luffy-type catastrophes before I get even a spec of Haki I’ll cry.

All activity ceases on the deck. “You don’t think he’d…” Nami says hesitantly.

“HU — HUAH WE GOT A PROBLEM!” Zoro suddenly shouts from across the deck. We all jump and spin around to him as he opens his mouth wide and yawns. “Oh. Yeah it was just a dream,” he mutters, then lays back down to continue napping.

“YOU SON OF A—” Nami growls, leaping halfway up out of her seat before Usopp dives over and shoves her back in the chair.

“Now Nami, it’s such a nice evening please let us not stain it with blood — or Zoro’s guts. Let’s just enjoy our high altitude cruise while we can, hm?” Usopp prattles off, arms shaking with the strain of keeping Nami from ripping Zoro’s throat out with her bare hands.

“Does anyone else hear that?” Sanji suddenly interrupts, head tilted up as he strolls over.

Nami ceases her struggle. “Hear what?”

Sanji shrugs, curly brow turned downward. “Like… bouncing?”

All of our heads snap up at once. “HE WOULD!” we scream in unison.

“Hey guys! Check this out, it’s so fun!” Luffy’s voice cackles from high above us.

“LUFFY GET DOWN YOU’LL KILL US ALL!” I yell, throwing Chopper at Usopp (they both scream) and scrambling backwards to see what the hell he’s doing up there. “You pop that octopus we plummet to our deaths! I don’t play with workplace health and safety! OHSA SAVES LIVES!”

“OHSA? What the hell is an OHSA?” Nami mutters.

“Shit! I was right! Luffy you gotta stop!” Sanji shouts, scrambling over to where one of the tentacles is holding our ship and climbing up. “The octopus is shrinking! If you don’t knock it off we’ll fall!”

“WHAT?!” Nami and Usopp shriek.

“Now that I look at it… It is indeed smaller,” Robin muses.

There’s a sudden influx of screaming from above us before both Sanji and Luffy go falling past the edge of the ship from right atop the octopus’s head.

“FUCK!” we all scream together, racing to the edge. Thank the lord almighty, Luffy’s hand is grappled onto the edge of the rail.

“Why isn’t it bouncy anymore?” Luffy complains from where he’s hanging with one of Sanji’s ankles clamped in his other hand.

“I told you! It’s *shrinking!”* Sanji yells from far below.

I heave a long sigh of relief that gets caught in my throat as my feet start to leave the deck. “Oh *hell* no.”

Luffy’s confused face drifts up past mine. “Is this right? Do ships work like this in the sky?” he asks.

“Er — no. You’ve doomed us all to a swift and gory death,” I hiss, hands clamping down hard on the rail as I go basically horizontal.

“Oh. Oops,” he apologizes.

On that cue everyone starts screaming. “WE’RE GONNA HIT THE SEA SO HARD WE SINK!” Nami wails.

“If the ship doesn’t shatter,” Robin responds, sweat flying up off her face.

“If we hit the water we’re *dead!* It’ll be like hitting a concrete wall!” I shout, catching Chopper as he nearly flies away.

“Over my dead body!” Usopp snaps, reaching back into his bag.

“Usopp, what are you gonna do?!” Chopper shrieks.

“What I always do!” Usopp responds, clicking his belt into place and hopping onto the rail with his octopus shoes. “Save our lives, of course!” He looks over the edge and freezes on the rails for a long second.

“What are you doing?!” Nami cries.

“Don’t be crazy, Usopp!” Sanji demands, finally grabbing onto the edge of the ship and pulling himself inside.

Usopp just hooks a grappling hook to the side of the ship and throws himself over the edge with Zoro’s Tarzan holler.

“YOU PSYCHOPATH ARE YOU TRYING TO OFF YOURSELF?! THERE’S EASIER WAYS TO DO IT!” I scream after him as the rope continues to fall. Then it goes taught and Usopp swings under the ship out of view.

“What the hell is he doing?!” Nami squeals.The ship jolts. It slows for a second. We all heave sighs of relief. “Guess whatever it was worked…” Nami breathes out.

Then the octopus pops. Er — shrinks. It’s probably still fine.

Everyone's screams are fucking deafening. Someone grabs me by the back of the shirt as they go flying, someone else accidentally smacks me in the face, Chopper flies right into my fucking chin so that’s great.

“Everyone hold onto something!” Luffy screes.

It’s too damn dark to see when we’re gonna hit the water. I curl myself around Chopper immediately anyway. “Brace yourselves! This is gonna fucking hurt! Wait — is Usopp *still down there?!”*

“I’m fine!” Usopp responds shakily, his rope having apparently pulled him back up to the rail while I wasn’t looking. “And when you say this is gonna hurt do you mEAN OH MY GODTHE *WATER—”*

We slam into the Blue Sea with all the force of a derailed train. My bent knees buckle as we crash, The sudden force sends my kitten heels right through the deck, punching two neat holes. Chopper shrieks loud in my ear. I sigh in brief relief that I didn’t fucking flatten him by falling forward.

Then Zoro falls on top of me with a squawk. Then we’re all doused in freezing sea water. It’s all together not a wonderful combination. I groan into the wood of the deck and elbow Zoro off my back, prying my shoes out of the deck and rolling over thanking god I, once again, did not flatten our doctor.

“Is everyone alive?” Luffy groans.

There’s some affirmative moans. “Nami, Robin, Ed, are you specifically ok?!” Sanji shouts.

“That sucked,” Nami cries.

The octopus falls from the sky right on top of Luffy. Guess it is fine. “At least we’re alive!” he cheers.

“You’re right. And we got to see an incredible place., Sanji admits, lighting up a cigarette in the night.

“This far down it barely feels real,” Robin chuckles.

“Like something out of a dream,” Nami agrees.

“It was a dream land! I wonder if we'll ever be able to see it again?” Chopper asks, shuffling off my chest.

“Well, you might see something similar when you die,” Zoro says wistfully.

“Zoro… you think you’re gonna make it into heaven?” Usopp says slowly.

I bark out a laugh. “If any of us get there I’ll throw you a party from hell.”

“You jerks!” Zoro grumbles.

Sanji sighs and starts making his way up the stairs to the galley. “The mosshead would get lost on his way even if they set him right on the stairway. I’m gonna put a pot of coffee on. Do you want some tea, Ed?”

I nod emphatically. “Yes please—”

“Sanji make dinner instead!” Luffy interrupts.

“Are you ever not hungry?! Have some coffee and be patient!” Sanji snaps, swinging the door open.

Luffy heaves a dramatic sigh. “Okay… by the way—”

The deck suddenly lights up with the flash of a million flood lights and sirens start blaring all around us.

“Er — does anyone know where exactly we landed..?” Luffy asks, squinting up.

"...Shit," I hiss. "Fucking *shit."*

"Uh — Ed?" Nami starts. "Where the fuck are we?"

No way. No goddamn way. Dude, we've been all but manga compliant up till here, we did NOT just land on fucking — "Navarone," I groan. "We just landed smack dab in the middle of Marine base G8!"

"Navarone?" Robin, Sanji and Nami all gasp.

"Shit shit shit — We gotta get the fuck outta dodge! Abandon ship! Regroup later!" I squawk, running for the edge of the ship.

"Abandon ship?!" Usopp screeches.

"For now, yes! We can't get caught right from the get go! Like I said, regroup later! Let's all aim to find the ship by tomorrow evening, latest!" I order.

Then I shuck off my shirt and dive into the water.

"ED YOU PSYCHO WAIT—" is the last thing I hear before going under.

———

I quickly realized that diving in without a plan was a shit idea. Mostly because it's still pitch fucking black and I'm not sure where I'm heading.

So that's not great, then I get snatched around the waist by a pair of arms. I freak out for a long second before I realize it's Nami in her waver.

"You fucking idiot! Don't do shit like that!" she hisses, dumping me in the back.

I spit out a spout of water. "Sorry. That was not very smart of me."

She glowers at me over her shoulder before turning back and flooring it across the bay. We run ashore on the rocky bank and immediately I duck into the tall grass while Nami tries to quietly drag the waver out of the water.

"What was that? Did you hear that?!" a squeaky voice shouts. We both freeze and lock eyes.

"Nah, man. I didn't hear shit. You're really letting that ghost ship story get to you, huh?" a second, much more laid back voice replies.

The first voice hums uncertainly. "...Fine. If you say so." There's faint footsteps that fade out slowly. We both heave sighs of relief.

"Stick together or split up?" I whisper.

"Split up. There's way more chances of us getting caught if we stick together," Nami whispers back. "See you back at the ship?"

I nod and bump her fist with my own. "See you on the ship."

Then I scurry up through the grass onto the path those guys were walking on and sprint towards the giant structure of G8.

Time to survive a Marine base.

Chapter End Notes

We got codes, we got guns, we got a Marine base, we got it all baybe.

Here's the full code list, incase you were interested. Some of the things on here and not said in the story may or may not also be important but I didn't want to spend a whole like 2k words going through all of them. Did not sound like fun.

Code
Lying - pinching nose
True - thumb on chin
Go - middle finger tap between eyebrows
Wait - four finger tap
Lay low/stealth - sliding palms together
Listen - tugging earlobe
Knock it off - quickly making a fist
Get me out of here - finger along jaw
Fake marriage go! - pulling ring finger
Don’t understand - wiggling fingers beside head
Hit me - fist to collar bone
Go with it - closed hand thumb to lips
Danger - three two finger taps on temple
Treasure - running thumb along fingers
Food - double tap open palm to mouth
Received - tap finger to temple

Character Codes
Luffy - hand on the back of head
Ed - OK sign in front of eye
Zoro - thumb running down left eye
Nami - money gesture multiple times
Usopp - finger gun
Sanji - drawing out the eyebrow curl w finger
Chopper - mime his antlers
Robin - crossed arms, the gesture she does when she uses her DF

(Yes there were questions about why Zoro's is the one it is. The explanation was that it was for the funnies. It worked.)

Chapter 58: Chapter Fifty Eight: You Don’t Look The Part, When You Lie Like Them

Chapter Summary

> *Lie Like Them - Nick Yeng*
>
> I freeze in place, eyes darting around for a hiding place. As much as I would love to just lie my ass off, a half naked kinda damp bounty poster having pirate is not very incognito without a disguise.

Chapter Notes

> School has me so stressed it may actually kill me — this fic and y'alls comments are really keeping me going T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Getting into the base is child's play, which is a little sad when you consider that this base is supposed to be one of the most secure in the Navy.

That’s besides the point. All the fucking hallways up in this bitch are either chisled out rock or the same sanitized white sheet metal and it’s getting fucking old. I swear to god I’ve been in this hallway at least three times already but everything looks the damn same and I’ve been making sure to alternate my left and right turns so I specifically *don’t* go in circles.

…And that’s the same door handle I ran into four hallways back and bent sideways.

“This is fucking ridiculous,” I mutter under my breath, kicking a bucket set on the side of the hallway. It clatters loudly across the stone tiles and I wince. As if the clacking of my heels hadn’t been enough.

“Did you hear that?!” someone shrieks from around the corner.

I freeze in place, eyes darting around for a hiding place. As much as I would love to just lie my ass off, a half naked kinda damp bounty poster having pirate is not very incognito without a disguise.

Fast paced footsteps close in quickly. Shit — only one option. I wretch open the door who's handle I mangled and throw myself inside, quietly slamming it behind me. The room is pitch black and I keep my ear pressed to the door as the frantic steps get closer and closer, then farther and farther. After a stressful minute of silence, I breathe a sigh of relief and step back from the door.

I don't get very far, there's a shelf only five feet behind me. I pause for a second, stretching my arms out to the sides and feeling around. Shelves to the left, shelves to my right. Seems I'm in some kinda supply closet. How lucky.

I push the door and it doesn't budge. I frown and go for the handle, maybe I locked it by accident?

There's no handle.

…Shit. I locked myself in a supply closet. A *fucking* supply closet. I pat my hands around for a lightswitch of some kind or a string to a light in the ceiling and come up empty handed. Well, this is not the worst situation I've gotten myself into.

I mean, it's pretty bad, but not the worst. Someone, be it Marine or ally, has gotta look in here eventually. Probably. Whatever. I'm taking a damn nap. I jam myself between a couple shelves, knocking something or other over, and cushion my head on my arms.

———

Something is outside the door. That's what wakes me up, the sounds of someone outside the door of this dumb supply closet. I scramble out from between the shelves and ready myself in front of the door. One way or another, I'm getting outta here.

The door swings open and some poor schmuck in a Marine uniform blinks wide eyes at my kitten heel as it smashes into his face. “MotherFUCKER—”

It’s fucking bright as I step back into the hallway, stretching my back and yawning. I kick Nami’s bitchass heels off into the closet and start stripping the Marine of his uniform. Lady Luck is obviously still on my side because this poor fucker has the same shoe size as me, and I steal his Marine issue boots without remorse.

Wearing another pair of pants over my own is not the most comfortable experience, but I refuse on principle to leave a perfectly good pair of cargo pants behind on this fucking base. My gun belt is clicked into place at the waist, and I’m good to go. I then shove the guy I knocked out into the closet and jam a rag that was on one of the shelves into his mouth.

Shutting the door behind me with a resolute click and sliding the Marine cap backwards on my head, I start making my way down the hallway. Hm… how much do I remember about this arc? Not a lot. I think Robin is somewhere masquerading as an inspector, that guy Usopp calls Condoriano.

“Well, no better option. May as well go see the Commander,” I quip to no one, turning the corner and smirking.

_____

I quickly realize that was a much better idea in my head, since I have no earthly idea where the Commander's office actually *is*.

I’m doing my little white person jog through the halls, head on a swivel for any kind of direction or sign. I swing left into the next hall and face plant directly into someone's chest. I all but tackle them to the ground, not really on purpose.

Some random Marine guy blinks up at me. I blink down at him. A second Marine in the hallway bursts out laughing.

My cheeks burn and I scramble off the poor guy, holding a hand down to help him up. “I’m so sorry, I should have been paying more attention,” I say quickly.

The guy I plowed over rubs the back of his neck as his face goes pink. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ve run into my fair share of comrades.” The other guy just keeps laughing.

Wait! This is my chance!

I turn on the doe eyes and blink rapidly up at the guy. “Thank god I found you, though! I’m supposed to be accompanying the inspector, but I got attacked by a pirate! Can you believe that?! A pirate in a Marine base?!” I whine.

The other guy stops laughing and the first guy leans down and gives me a concerned look. “A pirate you say? Are you alright? Where is he now?!”

Sucker.

I duck my head like I’m shy and peek up at him through my lashes. “I don’t know, it all happened so quickly. One minute I was with the inspector, the next some crazy guy calling himself Condoriano is trying to throw me over the side of the base!” I lie.

The second guy circles around behind me and rubs a hand on my back. “That must have been very scary. I’m so glad you’re ok,” he simpers. Ugh. Gross.

I nod quickly and put a hand over my chest. “I’m super lost though. The inspector and I were headed to the Commander's office before we got separated. Would you pretty please lead me there?” I ask, ramping up the puppy dog eyes.

The guy stares at me for a long second before his face explodes into beet red. “YEAH WE CAN DO THAT!” he blurts, steam basically pouring out of his ears. Hook line and sinker.

I gasp and clap my hands together. “Really?! You’d do that for me?! Oh you’re the best!”

He jerks the brim of his hat down and spins around with a squeaky sound. The other guy’s hand slides from my upper back to my waist as he starts leading me after the other. Creepy fuckin’ weirdo.

“Don’t you worry for a second, sweetheart. We’ll take you to the Commander,” he promises.

As they lead me through the halls they ask questions. What’s it like accompanying an inspector? Where have I been? What kinda places have I helped shut down? What do I think of Navarone? They just won’t shut the fuck up. Fucking small talk.

The best part? Everyone we pass nods at these guys and ignores us because they fucking *know them.* My one way ticket to Robin is paying off in spades. Eventually we reach a pair of big double doors with a couple more Marines standing outside.

The Marines greet each other with familiarity and that second guy finally takes his grubby hand off me. “Is the Commander in? We’ve got a special delivery,” the first guy jokes.

“That he is. The inspector just arrived and they found one of the pirates trying to impersonate her. They had to drag the guy away kicking and screaming,” one of the door guys comments.

Aw, shit. He’s talking about Usopp. I just gotta hope and pray Robin goes along with my ruse and doesn’t sell me out like him.

The Marine knocks on the door. “Commander! You have visitors!” Then he swings open the doors and gestures for us to enter.

As I’m ushered inside I take a second to take stock of the room. It’s got this weird fish patterned trim that I’m kinda into, and there’s three people inside.

First is a man I think is Lieutenant Drake, he's got crazy looking sideburns and one of the standard Marine coats resting on his shoulders. The second is Vice Admiral Jonathan, he's got close cropped dull pink hair and a beard with a darker mustache. His coat is much more ornate and he's wearing a sash of some kind under it. The last is Robin, dressed up in a purple high collared shirt and a Marine coat with a pair of shades obscuring her eyes. Her expression remains placid as we enter.

I dig deep into those drama skills and promptly burst into tears.

Everyone in the room freezes as I start frantically sobbing. "M — M — M — MAJOR SHEPHERD! I'M SO SORRY!" I wail at the top of my lungs. "I got attacked by a pirate and then I got lost and then these two gentlemen helped me but I'm so sorry I was careless and I promise it won't happen again—"

In between the frantic hand gestures and tear wiping, I put my hand into a fist and press my thumbnail to my lips.

Robin tilts her head down far enough that I can see her eyes above the sunglasses. Her eyes are full of mirth as she takes a few steps towards me. Her hand comes up to adjust the glasses and she taps a finger to her temple. I cease my talking but don't stop the waterworks, going from frantic crying to hiccuping sobs.

I tilt my head so I'm staring at the floor, hands at my sides in fists, hoping that 'received' sign meant she's going with it and not just fucking with me. A finger on my chin lifts my head back up. I can barely see Robin's eyes through the shades. "Let's just make sure it doesn't happen again, hm?" she murmurs.

Oh, that's kinda weird. I go with it. I blink big doe eyes up at her and nod slowly. "Of course. I'm sorry, Major," I murmur back.

She smiles. "Wonderful. Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm quite glad you're alright." She puts a palms against my cheek and I lean into it while she strokes a path with her thumb. Lieutenant, huh? Guess I've got my rank. "We should be on our way to commence the

inspection. I must say, my second being attacked right after we arrive is not the warmest welcome," she comments, and I hide a snicker by ducking my head further into her hand.

"Ah — yes, of course inspector. Where would you and your Lieutenant like to start?" Commander Jonathan inquires with a weirdly intense look at our display.

"I think we'll start with the structural qualities of the base," she says, putting her hand on my shoulder and turning me away from him. Haha, the Marine guys who escorted me here look fucking devistated. Losers.

"Lieutenant?! A *Lieutenant?!"* the first guy weeps.

The second guy, the one who was touching my back, stares to the heavens with his eyes obscured by his hat. "If I am to be court-martialed, I will go with dignity," he whispers.

"Sorry, before you go," Jonathan interrupts as we're halfway to the door. "What was your name, Marine?"

We both stop. I turn back to meet the Commanders gaze head on. New probably bad fake name? Hm. "Edith," I say, "Lieutenant Edith. It was a pleasure to meet you, Vice Admiral."

He gives a short nod. Me and Robin turn back around and exit out the door. Robin leads us through a few hallways, stopping to inspect random shit along the way, until we come to another door. Robin takes us inside and we're greeted by a library.

"Perfect," she mumbles, leading me through the stacks before she finds what she's looking for.

I can hear footsteps attempting to be quiet behind us and I saddle in close to Robin. "What was that?" I whisper quietly.

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye then returns to reading. “Displays of affection make people uncomfortable, and they are much less likely to find it strange I would let you off easy if I had some kind of inclination toward you. I apologize if I made you uncomfortable,” she explains in a whisper.

I shrug. “It was a little like being hit on by my mom so please never do it again,” I whisper back. Robin snorts loudly in the otherwize silent library. “Also, did you send Usopp away? What the fuck is up with that?” I snicker.

She snorts again, much quieter this time. “I thought he’d be much safer down in the brig with the swordsman. Besides, he didn’t use the code,” she whispers around her laugh. I silently chuckle. “You’re a much better actor than I gave you credit for.”

“Oh yeah I’m a massive fucking liar. I’ve spent most of my life masking so I’m a phenomenal actor as a side bonus,” I joke.

Robin smiles at me then glances back down at her book. “Hm. It seems this base is much more secure than I thought. Looks like it only has one way out.”

“Excuse me,” a voice suddenly calls from the end of the aisle. We turn to see a nervous Marine waiting there. “Commander Jonathan would like a word with the Lieutenant. About the pirate who attacked you,” he says awkwardly.

Me and Robin exchange looks. “Of course. Please return them in one piece, I’m quite fond of them,” Robin responds, brushing imaginary dust off my shoulder. “I’ll meet you back here or on the ship, then.”

I nod and wink at her. “Understood, sir.”

Then I follow the Marine. He takes me back into the commander's office and then leaves. It’s still just the Vice Admiral and Drake in here and I eye them both with a squared stance.

“I have to ask, Lieutenant, was your coat stolen by the pirate that attacked you?” Jonathan asks mildly. Yeah, figures someone would ask why a Lieutenant is dressed like a seaman recruit.

I shake my head. “No sir. I just prefer to forgo it during inspections. Keeps things less tense amongst the lower ranking recruits,” I bluff.

He nods with a small smirk. “I see. Lieutenant Drake, why don’t you see yourself out,” Jonathan says, taking a seat behind his desk.

Both me and Drake blink at him. “What?” Drake blurts. Jonathan raises an eyebrow at him and his shoulders slump. “Yes, sir. I’ll go check on the status of the prisoners.” Then he leaves the room.

Me and Jonathan stare at each other for a moment. “Why don’t you take a seat, Lieutenant Edith,” he says eventually.

“Why, you giving out chairs or something?” I quip, making my way over and sitting down slowly.

He chuckles and pours out a small box white chess pieces, passing me a second box of black ones. “Would you care for a game?”

I furrow my brow. “I’m afraid I don’t know how to play, sir,” I respond diplomatically.

He shrugs. “Shall I explain it to you? I would quite enjoy a match.”

I sigh. “Go ahead. Though I can’t promise I’ll be much of a challenge.”

He chuckles. “I’m sure you’ll live up to expectations. First, the king. He can move one square in any direction. If your king is captured you lose, so he must be protected at all costs.

Strawhat Luffy is simply walking around the base as himself, without disguise. Did you know that?" he says mildly, like he's commenting on the weather. *Luffy.* I stay silent.

"Next; the queen. She can move any number of squares in any direction. She supports the king and is the most important piece. There was a nurse in our OR nobody seemed to know, isn't that interesting?" he continues. *Nami.* My mouth stays shut.

"Then we have the rook. He can go any number of squares horizontally or vertically. He can also do a special move called castling, but you don't have to worry too much about that. We caught a swordsman first, he seemed to be taking a swim after rock climbing on our base." *Zoro.* Me and Jonathan maintain intense eye contact.

"The bishop can move any amount of squares diagonally. He also controls the colour he starts on. There was a very talented cook in our kitchen today, and not one of the two we were to have joining our staff." *Sanji.* Just what the hell is this guy doing? What kind of point is he making?

"Then there's the knight. It's the only piece that can jump other pieces, and it moves in an L shape. It's used to create forks and threats. Not only a nurse, but there was an unfamiliar Doctor performing surgery." *Chopper.* This is kind of pissing me off. Is he just trying to tell me he has us all figured out?

"And Lastly we have the pawn. It can move forward only one square, can capture on a diagonal, and if it reaches the end of the board it can promote to any piece except the king. Before you arrived there was another man claiming to be an associate of the inspector." He places two pawns down. *Usopp and Robin.*

He tilts his head and fiddles with the king piece. "I just can't pin down which piece you should be, E. D. Domino."

Yeah, figures.

I sigh, leaning back in my chair. "Well, first off I think you have us pegged all wrong so that's a problem," I say nonchalantly.

He raises an eyebrow. “Oh? Care to enlighten me?”

I blow air through my teeth. “As much as I hate to reveal much of anything to a naval officer… Why not? I’ll admit, I think you’ve got the king and bishop down pat. The king can’t be much of anything else by virtue of his goal and position, though I think him much more versatile than the box you’ve put him in, and our cook fits his role just fine. That nurse, though? I’d say she’s more of a knight. Jumping pieces simply suits her style,” I start, placing the appropriate pieces on the board.

“The swordsman would be a pawn, I think. Pawn’s are the first line of defence, yes? He’s a straightforward kinda guy like that. Very reliable. Perhaps the doctor would fit this role as well. I think a diagonal capture is something he would excel at. Sort of an ‘unassuming until he’s got you’ vibe,” I continue, putting all my pawns down.

“The inspector's false associate would be a knight as well. It’s a perfect fit for him. And the inspector herself… I’d say she’s the rook. She’s versatile, and a special move sounds great for her,” I smile lightly and fiddle with my final piece.

“And that leaves me. Call me self important if you like, but I think I make a swell queen. If for nothing else, supporting the king. And really, Vice Admiral? Making the nurse the queen simply because she’s the token girl? How lazy,” I admonish, settling back with the board fully set up.

Jonathan studies the board for a long moment. “Then again, I still don’t know how chess works, and I basically guessed every single one of those. How would you feel about a game of checkers instead?” I quip.

Jonathan chuckles low in his throat, then throws his head back in a full on laugh. “It would seem we’re both in checkmate! I hear you’re something of a detective, E. D. Domino. Is that true?” he asks.

I lean on my hand with a smile. “You’re fond of games, Vice Admiral. How about this; you get to ask me a question and I get to ask you a question. We exchange until, if not satisfied, we’re out of options?”

He hums, leaning forward to rest his chin on his own hands. “And if there’s questions we can't answer? Shall we both have the power to veto any question?”

I dip my head forward. “Agreeable. Within reason, of course. You should be able to justify a veto.”

He inclines his head. “Well, I asked you a question, so I suppose that puts the ball in your court.”

I snicker. “Of course. Yes, I am a detective. For my first question… hm, where is our ship being kept?” Might as well draw this out as long as I can, to be honest it’s kinda funny.

Jonathan crosses his arms. “Dock 88. Out of idle curiosity, why did you make Roronoa a pawn? Does he not deserve a higher position? He is the First Mate, is he not?”

I scowl at him. “Zoro isn’t the First Mate, *I am,”* I spit in a clipped tone. “And I already explained my reasoning. Why the fuck does everyone think that?”

Jonathan shrugs, not bothered by my snappiness. “First Mates are typically the second strongest crew member. People tend to make assumptions. Why are you and your crew infiltrating this base? What’s your goal?”

I tsk. “That’s two questions, Vice Admiral. For the first one, we didn’t do it on purpose. We simply fell in your base by happenstance. As for the second, we simply want to get out of here unscathed.” His thick brows furrow. “Now for my two questions. One, where is our gold. Two, would you be willing to let us leave?”

He chuckles. “Your gold is nearby. And letting you go? If we’re putting our cards on the table, I may think about it.”

I snort. “What a non answer.”

He lifts one shoulder. “We never agreed to be entirely forthcoming. How did you get into the base in the first place?”

I laugh at that. “Dude we, no shit, fell off an island in the sky and rode an inflatable octopus down. I’m not even fucking with you.” Then I narrow my eyes at him. “Is it true you’re Admiral Akainu’s protege?”

The amused look on his face drains ever so slightly. “He was a mentor, yes. Next question, why did you become a pirate? Someone with your intellect could have easily become a well-ranking naval officer.”

I choke on my spit and smack my fist into my chest while trying not to laugh and make it worse. “Me? A Marine?” I wheeze. “Oh sweetheart, no. I’m a pirate because there’s not much else as an option in this bullshit world. Ironically I fell into this profession in much the same way we fell into your base. So Akainu. You don’t seem to share his views, is that correct?”

He blinks slowly at me. “Our views are… not the same, yes. He is a firm believer in Absolute Justice, but I find myself more in the Moral Justice camp. This is interesting to you… how?” Jonathan questions, taking a short sip of a glass of water.

“Because Akainu is a piece of grade A shit and I hate him,” I deadpan. Jonathan spits his water out to the side. “Seriously, that guy sucks.”

“Why do you say that?” he squeezes out in a high pitched voice.

I stare at him blankly for a long moment. “Do we have time for that? Shall I go into the highlights? I mean, the man killed a whole boat full of refugees because he could. The motherfucker commits warcrimes like they’re going out of style and fucking no one calls him on it because he’s strong,” I spit, starting to gnaw on the queen piece I had been fiddling with before realizing that’s not a good idea. “Sorry. I gave your piece teeth marks,” I apologize.

He doesn't respond for a long moment. “...A boat full of refugees?” he eventually says slowly.

Oops. I don’t think that was common knowledge. “Is that a question?” I say lowly. He nods. “Not a single person made it off of Ohara, except Nico Robin, despite the story being that only the scholars were conducting illegal activities. Akainu was one of the Vice Admirals on the Buster Call,” I say carefully, praying Robin is more worried about finding a way off this base than keeping an eye or ear on me right now.

Jonathan is watching me with a steely expression. “How do you know this?” he says tonelessly.

“It’s my turn to ask a question,” I say bleakly.

“Indulge me. You can ask two next,” he continues.

I drop the queen piece back on the board with shaky fingers. “Veto,” I say, lips feeling dry.

“Your justification?” he pushes.

I close my eyes. “Vice Admiral, you’re pushing above your pay grade. Do you know how I got my bounty?”

There’s some shuffling noises as I keep my eyes shut. “I do. As far as I know you were impersonating a Marine officer and interfering with the actions of a real Marine during the events that lead to the destruction of Arlong Park at the hand of Monkey D. Luffy,” he explains.

I snort. “Damn right. That scummy rat faced punk was taking bribes and trying to steal from my friend. And I wasn’t *impersonating* a Marine officer.” He furrows his eyebrows. “Look

dude, I wanna get our shit and get out of your hair. Can we do that? To be perfectly honest I just wanna take a nap," I admit.

He sighs a heavy sigh and folds his hands before resting his forehead on them. "You know I can't just let infamous pirates waltz through my base and leave unpunished."

"Would you rather we brute force our way out? If you want us to leave this base with a couple bridges and towers fewer than it had when we arrived, I'm happy to oblige," I snark.

"Your Captain did say you would leave whenever you wanted," he sighs. He stands up from his desk. I follow his example and he crosses his arms tightly. "Give me something," he demands. I blink at him. "Something to make this worth my while. You won't tell me why you know about Ohara? Then something else."

I bite my lip. What can I give this guy..? "Er — anything more specific?" I ask. He rolls his eyes. I roll mine back. "You're a slippery guy, you know that? How about this; we were the ones who took down Crocodile. Smoker refused the credit but I think they gave him it anyway. I don't know if that's reached you yet."

He tilts his head back and forth then shrugs. "Good enough. Like I said, I can't just let you go. But you can go get the inspector, who is most likely Nico Robin herself. You can get her and you two can go meet up with your crewmates and try and escape. Navarone will do its job. Maybe we'll use your crew as an example for a stress test, making something good out of this," he decides.

I blink at him a couple times. "Shit, alright. Nice meeting you dude, I'll try not to kill any of your men," I say, making my way to the door.

"You better not," the Vice Admiral grumbles, sitting back at his desk.

I pause with my hand on the door handle. "By the way, sir," I add, "you should take a long hard look at your Moral Justice and think if it really lines up with what the organization you represent believes in. Just food for thought."

Then I exit the room.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said Ed didn't know how to play chess? Yeah well neither do I. I had to google how chess worked for this metaphor. I still don't fucking understand it.

Was writing this arc just an excuse to draw Ed in Marine uniforms? A little bit.

Chapter 59: Chapter Fifty Nine: I’m Wanted And On The Run

Chapter Summary

Message Man - twenty one pilots

“Alright Detective Domino, what’s our plan? Go get the gold or go meet up with our crewmates?” Robin inquires, starting down the hall and stepping unceremoniously over the poor groaning Marines we’re leaving behind.

Chapter Notes

The Robin & Ed team is one of my favourite things they're so good and fun.

I started writing *that* part of Water 7 yesterday and had a whole full-blown cry about it. The stress of school is GETTING TO ME. I have a portfolio presentation on Tuesday and when I say I'm gonna projectile vomit all over myself—

Anyway enjoy that chapter xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So we’ve been made,” is the first thing I say to Robin when I meet back up with her.

She blinks slowly at me from behind her glasses before sighing and pushing them up onto her head. “Of course we have. While you were gone I took the liberty of finding our quickest and least likely to fail escape route. What were you two talking about?”

I shrug. “He was prying me for info about the crew, so instead I pried everything we need to know out him.” Robin’s face falls into a sly smile. “The Merry is at Dock 88, and our gold is nearby.”

She chuckles and flips a couple pages in the book she has open to a map. “Is that so? I’d put our bets on it being here,” she says, pointing to a place on the map. There’s a sudden influx of footsteps as the Marines that were stationed watching us leave the room. “Seems the boys are making their move,” she comments.

She gently tears the map out of the book with a small wince. I cringe right along with her. “My librarian would be so disappointed,” I mutter. “She was a real stickler for book damage.”

“Smart lady,” Robin sighs, making for the exit. Sirens start blaring right as we cross the threshold.

“Halt Inspector, Lieutenant. What’s your destination?” a voice calls from further down the hall. We both turn to the Marine aiming his rifle at us. “I’m under orders to investigate all passers by.”

“I don’t believe I’m required to report my actions,” Robin snaps.

Two more Marines come around the corner on our other side. “But we are,” the Marine grits out.

“This place wouldn't even get two stars on hospitality,” I grumble, trying to communicate with my eyes that I’ll take the jokers behind us if she takes the first guy.

“Fine,” Robin sighs, giving me an understanding blink. “Tell your commander it’s been fun.”

“SCREW YOU!” The Marine shouts, hoisting his rifle higher. There’s a loud cracking sound and I watch the colour drain the two other Marines faces as I quick draw both my pistols and fire shots into their knees. I miss and hit the one guy's hip, but the other one flies true.

Wow, I never realized but it’ll be super hard to tell my pistols apart if I get them mixed up. I should fix that…

Two more Marines barely come around the corner before they’re all but folded in half by Robin’s limbs. “Guess there’s no need for these disguises anymore,” Robin chuckles,

shucking off her coat and purple turtleneck.

I shrug off my own uniform but snatch the coat off the floor. “You never know when you’re gonna need one of these things,” I chirp at Robin’s stare, slipping it on and shoving my arms through the incredibly oversized sleeves. “These were not meant to be worn like this,” I mutter, cuffing the sleeves as high as they’ll go.

“Alright Detective Domino, what’s our plan? Go get the gold or go meet up with our crewmates?” Robin inquires, starting down the hall and stepping unceremoniously over the poor groaning Marines we’re leaving behind.

“I say we get the gold now and save ourselves a whole lot of trouble,” I say, nudging a guy over to pat him down, snatching a baby Transponder Snail from his pockets. Then I step around one of the guys I downed and nearly slip on the blood all over the floor. I am willing to admit guns may not be the most passive weapon.

Robin extends a hand and I take it. “Fair enough. It is quite a sizable amount of gold, but I think we can carry it all if we try our best,” she says, leading me down the hall and around a couple corners by the elbow while I fiddle with the snail.

I give her a grin before dialing up the President's number from the baby Transponder. There’s a long moment of ringing before that familiar click of the call connecting sounds and the snail's face morphs into one of abject terror.

“Hello?! What do you want?! I’ll have you know this line is haunted and calling it can bring misfortune and also a curse down upon ye!” Usopp’s voice cries.

There’s faint sounds of my other crewmates in the background, as well as a couple explosion sounds not unlike cannon fire.

“Don’t say that about my incredibly secure and well maintained Transponder line,” I scold.

The snail's eyes light up. “ED! Are you alright?! We didn’t see you in the jail cell thing and no one else on the ship had seen you since you and Nami split up — GUYS WE DON’T HAVE A SINGLE CANNONBALL IMPROVISE FOR A SECOND — anyway we thought you might have gotten lost somewhere in the base or stuck somewhere—”

“Usopp oh my god slow down,” I interrupt. “I wasn’t *lost,* It doesn’t count as stuck if I *got out,* and I’m not stupid enough to get thrown in a crummy jail cell!”

“...Where did you get stuck?” he inquires, disregarding everything else.

My cheeks burn and I glance up at Robin, who’s watching me with amusement clear in her eyes. “...I got locked in a supply closet that I broke the handle on,” I mumble.

There’s a long moment of silence as my eyes dart back and forth between the snail and Robin. Then they both burst out laughing. Usopp’s laugh is familiar and loud, but this is the first time I’ve seen Robin really lose herself in a laugh.

She hunches in on herself, arms coming up to hold her sides, before throwing her head back and belting it out with all the force of a speeding train. “Dereshishishi!”

I watch her in complete awe as she laughs like we’re not in the hallway of a fortress with blood on my stolen shoes. Like we aren’t trapped in a Marine base. Like we aren’t being hunted by the government. Like it isn’t a crime for her to be happy—

She seems to regain her senses. Her hand slaps over her mouth and her cheeks flush deep red. She looks horrified with herself. Alright, heading that off right now.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up, you ingrates. Anyway Usopp, I called for a reason,” I grumble, trying to twist my mouth out of a smile. “Don’t try and leave just yet, me and Robin are getting all our shit back.”

The snail makes a confused face. “Our shit? What do you — oh hey Nami what’s up—”

“ED HALF OUR GOLD IS GONE!” Nami screams right into the Transponder. I jerk the tiny creature away from my face at the volume, wincing and hoping blood isn’t coming from my ears.

“Yeah Nami, we know. Me and Robin are on top of it. You just gotta keep the Merry from sinking or getting recaught while we do. Oh, and if you haven't, go get your waver,” I explain, following after Robin as she recommences walking. “There’s fucktons of abandoned docks around, I’d suggest you hide there.” Even if Jonathan is a strategy master and has everything figured out, it’s still a good idea. “We’ve got a map up here and wanted to let you know there’s something fucky with the water levels. My hunch is that they can change the water level inside the base because it's basically an enclosed lake, so the sooner we get outta dodge the better,” I continue.

“Hm… That would make sense. So you know where the gold is?” Nami asks, one track minded as always.

“There’s a vault I believe may hold it,” Robin adds.

I shake my head. “I doubt it. But I’m 90% sure I know where it actually is. But all our munitions are missing, right? You guys on the ship deal with that and maybe send Sanji our way if you start hearing explosions and screams.”

“Suggestion; Miss Navigator and the cook retrieve the waver and meet us wherever you think the gold is,” Robin puts forward. “If we need a distraction, send Longnose with then and have him split off to cause a little discreet trouble.”

“Sounds good to me. Try and get the waver under the commander's office,” I add. “New idea; send a team of Usopp and Zoro to cause trouble. Usopp can keep Zoro from getting lost, Zoro and keep Usopp from dying. There’s an ambush planned at that vault Robin mentioned, do with that what you will.”

“Alright, we’ll do what we can. You sure you want Luffy to stay on the ship? He is our heavy hitter,” Nami asks.

I give the snail a dry look. “He’s also a single minded evil menace if you set him loose. Give Chopper strict orders to keep that idiot in line, I trust him. Do *not* let Luffy leave the ship alone unless you’re gonna die,” I command. It’s impossible to make Luffy follow a plan and only slightly easier to plan around him. “Get him to info dump about something, I don’t know. If him and Chopper gotta leave, they gotta leave, but Luffy needs a supervisor.”

Me and Robin turn a corner into a hallway lined in windows and I do a double take at the pink tinged sky. “Is it almost sunset already? Time fucking flies when you’re infiltrating. We need to hurry the fuck up. I’d give us a strict deadline of 9 pm to get out of here.”

That’s when that fang thingy happens, yeah? I’d really rather avoid that.

“That gives us just barely two hours, and me and Sanji have to cross the entire fortress to get the waver. Plus getting back to the ship and escaping with the full pursuit of whoever’s attention we garner in our treasure reclamation,” Nami groans.

“You scared, Miss Navigator? Don’t think we’re up to it?” Robin snickers.

“What?! I didn’t say that!” she shouts incredulously. “We’re the fucking Strawhat Pirates! We’ll be out of here in an hour, *max!”*

I throw my head back and laugh. “You got it, Nami! We’ll see you soon.” Then I hang up and tuck the snail into the pocket of my jacket.

“So the commander's office? Did you see the gold while you were in there?” Robin inquires.

I shake my head. “He said the gold was nearby. I’m assuming he meant *nearby* nearby. So let’s make our way outside and see if we can’t drop in from the balcony.”

Robins snickers. “As you wish, Detective.”

Then she crosses over to the window and starts feeling around for a latch or something. I consider the ramifications of just blowing a hole in the side of the base and all the attention that would call to us.

“End of the line, pirate scum!” a screechy annoying voice yells from behind us. We both turn, and from the way we came we can see a gangly guy with an impressive widow's peak wearing the purple shirt Robin discarded standing with a couple Marines at his side.

“Oh, Condoriano,” I realize. “How the fuck did you get up here?”

“ARE YOU WEARING MY JACKET?!” he screams instead of answering.

I look down at the Marine coat I pilfered and back up at his red face. “Oh. Yeah.”

“And stop calling me that infernal name! My name is Major Shepherd! MAJOR SHEPHERD!” he screeches.

“Take a chill pill my guy. You’re getting too pitchy,” I complain, sticking a finger in my ear.

“AAUGH! Whatever! The commander of this base gave me and my mobile unit special permission to take any means necessary to capture you cretins, and I plan to do just that!” he announces.

I stare him up and down for a second. “Yeah, why do I doubt that?”

He makes another high pitched scratchy sound.

“You’re looking well,” Robin muses from where she's leaning on the window, seemingly giving up on trying to open it.

“Because of you people I’ve been humiliated, thrown in a jail cell, called that *stupid* name, but NO MORE! Bring me my new toy!” he chitters, throwing his hands up.

We both watch impassively as one of the Marines with him places down a chest-like case and pops it open, removing parts and and clicking them together. It’s—

Oh my god it’s a massive cannon. This fucker has a massive bird claw encrusted cannon.

“Behold! This is HQ’s latest state of the art portable bazooka, the Eagle Launcher! It packs as much punch as a warship's main cannon!” he proudly proclaims, hefting it up onto one of his shoulders and aiming it at us.

Me and Robin glance at each other. This fucker is *not* gonna hit us.

“You asked for it, pirates! DIE!” he screeches, pulling the trigger.

There’s a blast of smoke, then the giant red rocket bursts forward from the barrel, shooting down the hallway away from us. All of the Marines turn and we stare as a wall on the other end of the building explodes. The Major turns and takes out one of the Marines at his side with the barrel of his weapon.

“Right on,” I blurt.

“Major,” the guy he hit grits out, “you’re holding it backwards.”

“Oh. Yes, I see,” he mumbles, twisting it back around and hitting the guy across the face again. I jerk my head at Robin, indicating for her to step aside. She nods her head. “EAT THIS, STRAWHATS!”

The rocket flies at us and we both side step it. The window Robin had been futzing with explodes. I go running right for Condoriano.

He screams, aiming the cannon at me. A few pairs of arms grow from various points on his body and redirect the shot into the ceiling, and I slide across the floor under a bullet fired by a trigger happy Marine and kick Condoriano's legs right out from under him. He goes down with a pitchy scream and the cannon lands neatly in my hands.

"Oops," I say with a grin. The small group of Marines all panic and pull guns on me that are swiftly slapped out of their hands by Robin. "Can you grab the case?!" I holler, getting to my feet and running for the destroyed window.

"You got it," she responds, arms still crossed over her chest as I jump out the window, twisting back and shooting a shell into the hallway as Condoriano screams. I barely fall for two seconds before a hand snags in the back of my jacket.

I grin up at Robin and she smirks down at me, a daisy chain of arms and hands anchoring us to the cliff face as we swing. I have to laugh at the pure absurdity of it. The chain starts slowly pulling us upwards, and I start laughing harder at the giant black sooty hole that was the hallway we made our escape from. Robin reels us up onto a small outcropping and sets me down on my feet.

"Do you remember how this thing comes apart?" I ask, trying to twist the parts and detach them. Robin simply grows a pair of arms out of it and disassembles it in record speed, packing it up into the case without a word. "You're so goddamn cool," I sigh.

She rolls her eyes. "The commander's office should be a short climb that way. I think it's that one right there, but I'll check when we get closer," she says, pointing to a balcony just at the curve of the cliff.

I nod, yanking out the somewhat charred remnants of my sash and looping it through the handle of the case to tie it to my waist. "Then let's go rock climbing."

_____

Rock climbing is hard. Before it just would have been a question of upper body strength, which I have in spades now, but my ass is carrying a fucking portable bazooka and I haven't got any of the technique so uh, you do the math.

The math is that I fall down the cliff more than climb it. I think I've got to do a mile run in these shoes before I get used to the grip and outsole width.

"Detective Domino, I am beginning to suspect your idea about a skewed centre of gravity is correct," Robin says dryly.

"I'm sorry," I say miserably, slowly shuffling along with no less than ten hands holding me onto the rocky wall of the base. We aren't even at the actual metal sheet part where his balcony is yet, and I'm already having this much trouble.

After what feels like forever, we finally reach the correct balcony. The french doors to his office are shut tight, and I curse the bastard who frosted them, but there's a soft light emanating from inside.

"What's the plan? Go in guns blazing?" Robin whispers.

"Or we could just enter the room like normal people," I whisper back. It's not like we really need the element of surprise, this jackass knows we're coming.

Robin shrugs. "If you think that's best." She crosses her arms, then the doors fling open as a hand she grew inside unlocks them from in there.

Jonathan looks at us with a single raised eyebrow from his desk as we leisurely stroll in.

"Good evening," I say diplomatically. "I believe there's an ambush outside those doors, am I right? Robin, why don't you block the door."

Robin does just that, an arm growing from each door and locking hands hopefully being enough to keep unwanted guests out.

"I must say, you pirates have impressed me. You're bold and preceptive, and I admire that. But you are pirates nonetheless. It's a shame we couldn't meet under better circumstances," Jonathan sighs.

I shrug, checking over the bags in the corner to make sure everything's here. As far as I know, it is. Nami didn't really give me an inventory of what we were and weren't missing. "Them's the breaks, dude. Some of the most interesting and brave people in the world are gonna be on the other side. But you Marine folks always seem to care about that more than us pirates," I muse.

The doors start to rattle and shouts come from the other side. "Commander Jonathan!" someone calls from the door. Robin's hands hold fast.

I gather everything up between three giant sacks. "Hey, how mad would you be if I stole this fishing trophy?" I ask, gesturing to the fishing trophy he has set up in the corner.

"Very," he deadpans.

"Fair enough," I respond, throwing one of the sacks over my shoulder. "You think our ride is here yet?" I ask Robin.

She closes her eyes for a second. "They're closing in fast. Oh dear, the cook just kicked some unfortunate man into the lake. Poor guy shouldn't have tried grabbing onto Nami," she commiserates.

I laugh. "Yeah that sounds right. Then I believe it's time for a dashing exit, no? I hate to leave you, Vice Admiral, but our time has come to a close. Adieu until next time," I sing song, jaunting out onto the balcony.

“Now is that really the wisest choice? Your friends are still in the vault, after all,” Jonathan pipes up.

I pause and turn to him. “Still? Those knuckleheads. Well, I feel bad for your men. My friends aren’t trapped inside with your Marines, your Marines are trapped in an enclosed space with our *Zoro.”*

His face does something funny but I’m distracted by Robin grunting. I turn to her and see that there’s beads of sweat popping up around her temples and her hands are clenched where they’re crossed.

“Are you ok?” I ask worriedly.

She shakes her head, a small inauthentic smile flashed at me. “I’m just fine. It seems the Marines attempting to break in have gotten a battering ram.”

Bitch what.

“Aw, they’re gonna break down my doors. That’s unfortunate, I don’t have the budget to get them replaced,” Jonathan moans.

“Ok, we’re leaving now,” I grumble, hefting a second bag up and nearly throwing my back out. “Oh my god these are heavy.”

Jonathan stands up from his desk. “Like I told you earlier, I can’t just let you walk out of here.”

I scowl at him. “Yeah, ok, how exactly do you plan to stop us—”

Robin suddenly gasps and rips her arms apart, the hands on the door disappearing in an explosion of flower petals. “Get down!” she yells, throwing herself at me and taking both of us to the ground.

Then the whole front of the room explodes. I scream as me and Robin hit the floor, one of Robin’s hands catching the back of my head to keep it from smashing into the carpeted tile.

“What the hell?!” I hear Jonathan yell.

Then I hear the cackling. Major-fucking-Shepherd comes galvanting into the room, tossing and catching an explosive like a baseball. “Didn’t see that coming, did you, pirates?!”

Robin hisses as she pushes herself up off of me and I take stock of the room. The doors are completely gone, a horde of Marines are flooding in (though most of them are keeping a healthy distance from Condoriano and shooting him wary looks), there’s a small pile of Marines that look like they got thrown into the wall on the opposite side of the door and are still slumped against it, Jonathan looks halfway to furious, and one of Robin’s wrists is turning an angry red.

“You son of a bitch,” I hiss. “You scraggly haired limp noodle son of a bitch!”

“You blew up my office!” Jonathan suddenly shouts. We all turn to him in various states of surprise. “You just blew up my *fucking* office!”

Condoriano scoffs. “Watch your tone! Have you forgotten who I am? As an inspector here with special permissions from HQ, I can do whatever I see fit! I am your superior!”

“He said you gave him the OK to do whatever it took to catch us, by the way,” I add, just to be a shit.

Condoriano’s eye twitches. Jonathan's eye twitches back. “Is that so? So not only have you been destroying my base in futile pursuit of criminals I’ve told you on numerous occasions

will fall under the jurisdiction of my men, you've been falsifying orders as well? Let me make something perfectly clear; you make another move like that, that puts the safety of my men at risk, and I don't care how high up you think you are — I'll send you back to HQ in a *dinghy."*

The Marines' jaws are on the floor. My jaw is on the floor. Robin's jaw is on the floor. Condoriano is sputtering. "Y — y — y — you can't speak to me like that! I'll report this to your senior officer!" he shrieks. "I'll have this backwater base decommissioned! You hear me?! *DECOMMISSIONED!"*

"This guy sucks," I stage whisper over to Robin. Her face twists up and she nods.

"My senior officer? You're going to report this to my senior officer? No. I think you have this backwards. *I'm* going to be reporting this to my senior officer. Then your senior officer. Then I'm having you *court-martialed!"* Jonathan shouts.

I tap Robin on the shoulder as the Marines dissolve into a shouting match. I slide my palms together then tap between my brows with my middle finger.

Lay low and go. I fucking love having secret codes. God this is so useful. Robin does the received sign and we both start slowly shuffling backwards, quietly dragging our gold with us.

That is, until some random schmuck notices us and points in our direction. "Hey! The pirates are escaping!"

"WHAT?!" both Jonathan and Condoriano take a break from screaming at each other to scream at us.

"You lousy no-good pirates! You won't escape!" Condoriano screams, holding his explosive up menacingly. All the Marines take a huge step away from him as he advances — he gets halfway to the balcony before he stops.

I aggressively jab my finger at him. “SHUT UP! I’m done with your shit, you incongruent triangle of a motherfucker! YOU FUCKING HURT ROBIN! If I didn’t think your blood would make me smell like four month old cream cheese I’d fucking SLAUGHTER YOU!” I shout at the top of my lungs, bumping into the balcony railing.

There’s a low rumbling of some kind coming from somewhere and I twist around to find the source. I’m distracted from that by a rapid tappy/clicky sound from below us and look down just in time for an eyeful of Sanji running full tilt up the cliff face with a face full of vengeance.

“What the fuck—”

“WHO HURT ROBIN?! HUH?! *HUUUH?!”* he screams, shooting up over the edge in a graceful flip that looks right out of the figure skating olympics, and cracks down *hard* on Condirano’s face with his heel.

The Marines all make a gaspy ‘oooooh’ sound while me and Robin slap our hands together in a high five. “Right on.”

“Hey guys! Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Nami calls from far below. I peek down at the ground as the sounds of extreme violence ramp up in the commander's office. Nami is down there in her waver waving her arms and looking very tiny from this far up. “You got my gold, right?! Let’s go!”

“You got it baby!” I holler back, grabbing my two bags in a tight grip and flashing Robin a wide smile. “Shall we, my lady?”

Robin laughs and grabs hold of the over bag, an extra arm growing from her shoulder to help hold mine. “But of course, good detective.”

Then we jump.

Chapter End Notes

GET THAT BITCH A CANNON! BITCHES LOVE CANNONS!!

Also I just think Jonathan should have gotten to yell at Major Shepherd. For his mental health.

OH and Robin with The Laugh™ is something that can be so personal—

The mental illness hit so now have a bunch of art of a character who you won't even know exists until like post-timeskip and their entire existence is a spoiler the pain THE PAIN!

Chapter 60: Chapter Sixty: Love Is Calling

Chapter Summary

Andromeda - Weyes Blood

“Jesus Christ,” I curse. “That man is crazy and I’m into it.”

Chapter Notes

I love this song so fucking much it's not even funny.

THIS CHAPTER IS 5K SOMEONE NEEDS TO STOP ME.

Also why did no one tell me getting asks on Tumblr would be so fun? I am having the time of my life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A net of hands springs from the waver to cushion our fall, Nami screeching at the top of her lungs as our landing makes the device quake violently. The whole back of the craft dips dangerously low in the water, and I lunge forward to wrap my arms around Nami’s waist to keep myself from falling overboard.

“This thing was *not* meant to carry so much weight!” Nami cries, revving it up. “Sanji! We’re leaving!” she screams up the cliff.

“OK!” Sanji screams back, right before a Marine is kicked over the side of the balcony and slams into the water beside us.

Nami shoots off in the waver. “Uh, are we gonna wait for Sanji?” I ask, tightening my grip on Nami.

“Don’t worry about him!” is her response.

There's a sudden influx of screaming up above and we all look up to see Sanji jump off the balcony, turn midair and fucking kicking the explosive Condoriano had earlier into the room (which explodes. People go flying) then start falling towards us.

"Jesus Christ," I curse. "That man is crazy and I'm into it."

"Don't let him hear that, I think he'd go into catatonic shock," Robin muses, scooching forward and holding onto the sides of the waver to keep herself steady, a small wince crossing her face when it strains her wrist.

"Incoming, my lovelies!" Sanji announces, sticking the landing on the tiny bit of free space left in the waver. I'd question how a fall from that height didn't break his fucking knees, but I'm just gonna take the win while I can.

"Ok! Back to the ship!" Nami cheers, speeding us up.

"CURSE YOU! CURSE YOU ALL!" Condoriano screams from behind us. We all flip him the bird in unison.

We hit a bump of some kind in the water and Sanji nearly falls off the back of the waver. "Um, Nami dearest, can I please hold onto something?" he asks requests, hands clamped down on the very back of the vessel.

I hold an arm out. "C'mere baby I got you., I declare.

His face lights up and he all but leaps across the tiny vessel to grab onto me. "This is a dream come true," he mumbles, leaning his head on my shoulder.

I pat him on his. "That's kinda lame. Dream about something that can't happen everyday."

Robin snickers. “How romantic.”

“Hold onto your asses!” Nami suddenly proclaims. The waver makes a sharp turn and the water where we were sprays up in an explosion of white. “Told you we would draw fire!” she complains. Indeed, the cannons on the sides of the cliffs are following us and there’s already another explosive rocketing towards us.

“I got this!” I announce, brandishing my gun and closing one eye to aim it at the incoming cannonball before realizing that’s worse and opening them both. I flip the axe dial in the barrel and fire. Do you have any fucking idea how insane it is watching a flying slash carve a cannonball in half? It’s fucking insane.

The two halfs sink into the water and blast up another spray of white water. “Ok that’s pretty cool,” Nami admits.

“Of course it is,” I say matter of factly, repeating the action at another cannonball on a collision course with us.

We speed across the lake, fending off cannon fire through various cool means because we’re cool people, until one of the cannoneers screams loud enough for all of us to hear.

“What the shit?” Sanji mumbles from behind me. We all turn to where that screaming was, and get a perfect view as it fires right at us. “I got this one,” Sanji sighs, gearing up a foot.

“Wait,” I stop him, squinting at the ammunition. “Is that..?”

A tangled ball of Zoro and Usopp, both screaming their heads off, comes hurting towards us at top speed. “WHAT THE SHIT?!” Sanji says louder.

“CATCH US OH MY GOD CATCH US!” Usopp screeches.

“IF YOU DROP US I’LL KILL YOU!” Zoro howls.

“I got this one,” Robin announces, crossing her arms as that familiar net of arms grows above us, catching the boys like a basket and sending the waver rocking dangerously.

Nami sobs, trying to keep it moving. “MY POOR WAVER WASN’T MEANT FOR THIS!” She whips her head around to bare her teeth at the boys, now settled in a heap on top of our treasure. “ARE YOU FUCKING CRAZY?! DID YOU SHOOT YOURSELVES OUT OF A *CANNON?!”*

“IT WAS ZORO/USOPP’S FAULT!” they scream in unison.

“Zoro got us lost! We were on the other side of the base literal seconds ago!” Usopp wails.

“Usopp made us hide in the cannon! It’s not my fault they lit the damn thing!!” Zoro snaps

“I don’t care whos fault it was, that was fucking *cool!”* I shout, stars in my eyes.

“NOT THE POINT! WE ARE GOING TO SINK!” Nami roars, making us all shrink back, which only serves to make the front for the waver raise and the back dip further underwater. “We need to be at the Merry *yesterday!”*

“YOU GUYS!” Chopper’s voice suddenly calls amongst the still ongoing cannon fire.

We all turn to the left and our jaws drop. From around the curve of the fortress comes the Going Merry, manned by Chopper, who is inexplicably covered in bright orange paint and crying, and Luffy, who is more distracted fighting a sunglasses and Marine-cap-wearing sea lion that evidently knows tai chi.

“The fuck?” we all blurt in unison. Luffy punches the sea lion so hard it flings over the side of the ship, then he pumps his arms up in victory.

“Guess our ride is here?” Nami says incredulously.

“Thank god,” I sigh, scooching over when Robin tries to move up further to keep out of the water.

“Hey guys! You need some help?” Luffy calls down, not waiting for an answer before shooting his arms down and grabbing as many of us as he can to haul up. I nearly choke when his arm wraps across my neck, just barely inching up to avoid an unceremonious garotting.

A bag of treasure, Zoro, Usopp, Robin and I all land on the deck, some more graceful than others. Sanji leaps up after us, a bag of treasure in each hand and Nami on his back. “This stuff really is too heavy,” he complains, dropping the sacks on the ground.

“Let’s just be thankful they only took half of it. Can you imagine trying to carry *all* of it back?” I grunt, smacking a wet kiss onto Luffy's cheek.

Nami throws her head back and groans. “I would just die. Now that we’re all together and have our gold, let’s leave once and for all. Let’s hope the mess we left behind is enough to keep the Commander distracted long enough.”

“We still have a whole bunch of warships guarding the exit, and if I remember correctly you gave us a deadline of 9 pm, right Detective Domino?” Robin adds. When I nod she continues. “We are quickly approaching that time. I’d give us less than half an hour, as an estimate.”

I curse under my breath. “Alright, let’s move. Nami, take point and get us out of here.”

Nami gives me a sharp nod then sets off, barking orders and adjusting sails on her way up to the top deck. Luffy scrambles the opposite direction, clamoring his way up onto Merry’s head as we start cutting a path through the dark waters.

“The exit is right up ahead! I think we can beat the tide!” Nami announces from the back.

“You think or you know?” Zoro grunts, looking back at where the Marine ships have ceased their chase to drop anchor. “Because that doesn’t bode well.”

I curse again. “Usopp, get out here! We’re improvising!”

“What do you mean improvising? Is something wrong?!” he shrieks, charging out of the galley with wild eyes. Everyone else just kinda moves in and we form a loose circle.

“If the Marines are stopping we’re too late. We gotta get out of here manually. I think I can get us up into the air, but I need a way for us to land once we’re out. Can you handle that?” I ask, untying my sash and starting to assemble my stolen cannon.

Usopp frowns for a second. “Yeah. Yeah I can do that. We have some flame and breath dials we could use to inflate the octopus we drifted down with?”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” I confirm, locking the barrel into place. I fucking love this thing, man. “Can I borrow your impact dial?”

He furrows his eyebrows and passes it over. “Too bad we lost the octopus,” Usopp says miserably.

“Uh huh,” Chopper confirms.

“I'll say,” Nami cries.

“Where’d it go?” Sanji questions.

“The octopus?” Robin asks.

“Yeah…” Zoro adds.

“Can’t have gone far,” I put forward.

“I have it!” Luffy announces.

“Luffy has it,” Usopp repeats.

“He does?” Chopper asks.

“That’s what he said,” Nami says, still crying.

“Who has it?” Sanji asks.

“Luffy,” Robin answers.

“He has it,” Zoro reiterates.

“The Captain’s got it,” I nod.

“Sure do,” Luffy confirms.

We all do a double take. “Wait what?! Where?!”

Luffy immediately sticks his hands down his pants and pulls out the octopus. “Right here!”

“Luffy, that's grody! Don’t stick shit in your pants! You have pockets for a reason!” I scold, smacking him upside the head.

“But he helped us out, I wanted to keep him safe,” he says matter of factly.

I heave a sigh and pinch his cheek. “You’re a sweetheart, but for the love of god be more sanitary. Usopp, get set up as fast as you can. We don’t have the luxury of time right now,” I command, grabbing a rope and quickly tying it around my waist. “If this obliterates all my bones, I fully expect you guys to spoon feed me and cart me around on all our adventures.”

Then I hop up onto the back deck, turn to give my crewmates a salute, and start rappelling over the side of the ship. The water levels are way lower than they were earlier, so we probably don’t have a lot of time until the Merry runs aground.

I take a deep breath, jam the impact dial onto the back of the bazooka and brace the thing as close to the bottom of the ship as I can get and wait for the OK to fire.

“Ed! We’re ready!” Usopp hollers over the side of the ship.

“Then prepare for liftoff!” I yell back, tensing up my shoulders and praying. Then I fire the bazooka.

Ok, so it does shoot us out of the water, which is good. It also flattens me against the hull of the ship with the sheer force of it and nearly takes my arms out of their sockets though, so that’s less good. “HOLY MOTHER OF OW!”

The Merry shoots up past the first cliff, just barely clearing it before starting to descend. “Round two! You better be inflating that fucking thing!” I scream, gearing up once again. Shooting the cannon the second time is worse. I’d be more worried about leaving a

permanent me-shaped hole in the bottom of the Merry if all my worry wasn't focused on my hands losing their grip on my weapon.

All I manage to do is grab Usopp's dial off the end before my cannon falls from my hands. I watch in absolute horror as my beloved weapon falls and falls and falls before finding a home in the water. "NOOOOOOOOO!" I scream.

"ED?! Are you ok?!" Sanji shouts down.

"MY CANNON! MY PRECIOUS CANNON! ONCE AGAIN I AM FOILED BY THIS WRETCHED WORLD AND IT'S EVIL MACHINATIONS!" I wail, clinging hard to the rope as we fly over the walls of Navarone and out to open sea. "CAN'T HAVE SHIT ON THE GRAND LINE!"

Someone or other pulls me back up onto the ship while I mourn my loss. Why does this keep happening?!

"I wonder how far we're gonna fly?" Chopper asks, sitting down on the railing.

"Who knows? Ask the balloon," Zoro muses.

"Let's just enjoy the ride, leave it to fate," Robin snickers.

"But no more Marine bases!" Nami jokes.

"I'll go anywhere if my lovelies are there!" Sanji swoons.

"Moron," Zoro scoffs.

“What did you say?!” Sanji shouts, spinning around.

“You heard me, moron,” Zoro repeats.

I repeatedly slam my fist into the deck. “My cannon… My baby…” I cry.

“I’m hungry!” Luffy declares.

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“Chopper, check out Robin’s wrist. Leave me alone,” I complain, batting Chopper’s evil little doctor hooves away from me.

“Was Robin the one to set off an incredibly damaging device without proper bracing? No? Then be still!” he snaps. At the very least he’s easier to look at now, Nami had taken him aside and washed all the paint off him. He was still too embarrassed to give an explanation though.

“She did hold off a battering ram and was holding a door when it exploded,” I offer.

Chopper’s eyes bug out. “SHE WHAT?!” Then he’s scurrying off. Hehe, sucker.

“The octopus is shrinking! Brace yourselves for landing!” Zoro suddenly announces. I just sit back in my chair as we slam into the sea.

The octopus plops down on Luffy’s head again, and this time he gives it a hug. “That’s two times you saved us! Thanks buddy!” he cheers, tossing him into the sea.

For the sanity of everyone involved, I'm going to neglect mentioning the sea monkey tidal wave incident. The less said about that the better.

When it's finally settled down though, I'm set up on the upper decks just behind Nami's tangerine trees with my snails, now joined by the baby I accidentally stole along with my jacket, and a lawn chair and I finally get to make my long awaited call to Ace.

It barely rings at all before Ace picks up. "Hey bestie! How's your life been?" I open cheerfully.

There's a short moment of silence. "Ed?" he mutters.

"...Yes?" I say hesitantly.

"I COULDN'T REACH YOU FOR LIKE A WEEK! WHAT THE HELL!" he explodes. "I KNOW YOU DIDN'T HAVE RECEPTION BUT GODDAMNIT!"

"Hey is that Ace?" Luffy cheers, bounding over to me and my snails, plopping down on my lap and nearly collapsing my lawn chair. "Hi Ace! You'll never guess what happened, we were in the sky and there was this crazy guy and a gorilla and then I had to beat up that crazy guy and he was made of lightning and I rang this super awesome bell for the monkey guys and diamond head guy—"

I slap my hand over Luffy's mouth. "Honey. Slow down." I turn back to the snails. "Haha. Sorry dude we had to fight a god and the trip took longer than expected."

"WHAT?!" Ace shouts.

I shrug and give him a brief rundown of our trip, with fun little Luffy interjections that I'm going to assume go right over Ace's head but the snail nods like it understands regardless so I don't bother translating the Luffyisms.

“...So the whole thing only took two days? And you were just fucking around partying for twice that time?” he asks dryly.

“Well yeah, we earned it. I stabbed a guy, that’s a big step for me,” I say, dead serious. “Oh and then there was the Marine base we just escaped from. That kinda sucked.”

“I’m sorry what—”

Another explanation later, complete with Luffyisms, Ace is somehow even more done with our shit.

“Well what have *you* been doing while we were infiltrating a Marine base?” I snark.

Ace is silent for a second. “...Infiltrating a Marine base,” he mutters. This fucking guy. “I was hunting a lead in some kingdom, Lulusia I think?”

“Lulusia Kingdom?” I murmur. Isn’t that the place that gets incinerated off the map..?

“You been?” Ace asks.

I shake my head and clear my frown. “Nah. Heard their King is a dick though.”

“Hm. Shame I didn’t fuck more stuff up there then. Anyway I punched a doctor by accident, got thrown in a river, met some girl named Moda, infiltrated Marine base G2, set a recon ship on fire, saved said ship, delivered a letter, got some info, that's pretty much it. It's been... an eventful week."

“How fun and normal,” I deadpan. I twist my jade conch ring between my fingers and tug on the chain connecting it to my lobe. Do I want to tell him anything..? I think about

Blackbeard's smile and an involuntary shiver races up my spine. “Luffy, why don’t you go check up on Robin?” I say softly.

Luffy just looks at me for a moment. “Okay,” he says eventually, smooshing a kiss into my temple before getting to his feet and skipping away.

Ace’s expression is trepidatious as I turn back to the snail. “What is it?” he asks lowly.

I bite my lip. “So, uh, situation update babe. Promise you won't lose your shit,” I start nervously.

“I make no promises,” Ace says tentatively.

I sigh. “Fair enough.” I suck in a deep breath and bite the bullet. “We met Blackbeard,” I ignore Ace’s sharp intake of breath, “it was… unpleasant to say the least. I don’t know how the fuck Whitbeard of all people managed to miss whatever the hell is wrong with that thing because he was *off-putting.* Er — anyways, I shot him in the face.”

The snail takes a deep breath.

“WHAT!? *WHAT?!* ***WHAT THE FUCK?!”*** he screams.

A couple of my crewmates' heads turn in my direction and I wave them off with what I’m sure is a hilarious expression on my face. I don’t even know the rest of what Ace yells at me, half of it’s gibberish and the rest is just straight screaming.

He eventually calms to the point of making a coherent sentence. “You’re telling me Blackbeard has *seen* you and Luffy?!” he grits out, still sounding halfway hysteric.

I furrow my eyebrows in concern. “Ace, take a deep breath. I promise everything is fine. Nothing happened to Luffy, I wouldn’t have let it,” I promise.

“You shot him in the face,” he squeezes out, voice strangled.

My teeth pierce the meat of my lip. “There’s something else,” I admit. Ace’s breath audibly hitches. “He said some real weird shit, and he like… he didn’t know me, but — but he, I don’t know, *recognized* something about me? And I don’t know what the actual *hell* that means, but I promise it isn’t good—” I cut myself off from further rambling. It won’t help anybody if I get the both of us freaked out.

“Ed,” Luffy’s voice suddenly says right beside me. I jump and my eyes snap up to meet his. He sits down on top of me in the chair again, a bowl of baked apple slices covered in cinnamon pressed into my hands. “Sanji made you a snack. Stop freaking out, ok?”

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second. “Aye, Captain,” I respond, inhaling the smell of apples and spices from the bowl.

“You stop freaking out too, Ace,” Luffy orders.

“...Yeah yeah, you brat,” he mumbles, the snail's eyes closing as well.

I put a forkful of apple in my mouth and chew slowly, savoring the taste. “Ok,” I say after a second. “It’s fine. We’re all fine. We’re nowhere near Jaya anymore, so even if Blackbeard wanted to find us he couldn’t. I would like to — once again — urge you to leave this guy the fuck alone if you aren’t gonna get help.”

The snail’s face pinches. “Ed…” Ace starts, mouth a tight line. “We’ve been over this. You know I can’t—”

“Alright, alright. Sorry for bringing it up,” I grumble, cutting him off.

“You need to chillax, Ace. That creepy weirdo never even got close enough to touch us. Except for outside that bar before we went to the monkey guys, but no one tried anything so that doesn’t count,” Luffy adds.

Wait — *shit.*

“You met him before you called me the first time?! Why didn’t you tell me then?!” Ace shrieks, the President’s eyes bugging out of its stocks.

“Because we were about to go no contact due to being shot into the sky, and I didn’t want to leave you in a state like *this* where neither of us could reach one another!” I snap back, spearing an apple slice with my fork. “And who taught you to say *chillax?* Was it Shanks? That fuckin’ *rat,”* I mutter.

“Unfortunately that makes sense,” Ace grumbles. “Any other earth shattering revelations you want to throw at me right now?” I grimace. “What was that? You made a face. What was that?!”

I squint and suck on my teeth. “Riiiiight, so, funny story. This guy from where I’m from, which objectively shouldn't be possible for *reasons,”* me and Luffy make sidelong eye contact, “left me a message up there. Like straight up left me a dial with a song on it and a message. And apparently was on the Pirate King’s crew. So… that’s a thing.”

Ace takes a sharp breath. “The Pirate King’s crew?” he repeats, to which I nod. “What kind of message?”

I hesitate for a second, thinking of my task. “He told me to keep Luffy out of trouble,” I semi-lie, flicking the brim of Luffy’s straw hat.

Both brothers blink at me. “Really?” they ask in unison. Oh right. I’ve been ending the recording every time I play it for the crew right before the message. Only Robin has heard the full instructions, and I kinda plan to keep it that way.

“That’s… fucking creepy. Who exactly is this weirdo? Do I gotta go kill him?” Ace demands.

“No!” I scowl. “That guy’s my… mine! If he’s gotta be murdered I’ll do it myself! He’s like… uh… my pseudo dad/weird uncle as of right now! So no killing him unless he turns out to be a lunatic. Which he better not.”

Oh god if he turns out to be a psychopath I’ll cry.

“...Sure. Whatever you say,” Ace says doubtfully.

The three of us shoot the shit for over an hour, just talking about what we’ve seen over the past week and the people we’ve met. Eventually we’re interrupted by Sanji calling us for lunch. Luffy immediately shoots up, kneeing me in the spleen, and runs off screaming about meat.

“That fucking — I gotta go Ace, I’ll talk to you later,” I curse, reaching for the Transponder.

“Ed,” Ace interrupts me. I pause with my hand on the receiver. “I’m going to the nearest island and getting an Eternal Pose for Jaya. I’m still going after Blackbeard,” he promises.

My face scrunches up. “Damnit Ace, why can’t you let sleeping dogs lie?”

The snail makes an accusatory face. “Would you?” he counters.

I sigh. “...No. But I’m stupid, you’re supposed to be less stupid than me.” I bite down on my lip again and run my thumb across the metal of the receiver. “Just please be careful,” I beg quietly.

The President gives me a resolute nod. “You got it. I’ll talk to you later, Ed.”

I smile down at the freckled snail. “Yeah. Bye Ace, love you.”

And I hang up.

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After lunch I return to my snails with a couple lettuce leaves and a new call destination in mind. Jonah takes much longer than Ace to pick up. “What do you want? I’m busy!” he snaps into the receiver.

“Yeesh, sorry. I’ll call back later,” I grumble, going to hang up.

The snail’s eyes widen. “Ed? Seas, I thought you died. You haven’t bugged me since before your new bounty dropped and no one has seen hide nor hair of your crew since then. Where the hell have you been?”

I bat my eyes. “Oh darling, were you worried about little ol’ me? I’m flattered!”

Jonah’s expression flattens. “Nevermind. You should have stayed gone.”

I swoon back in my lawn chair. “Jonah you wound me! Where did all your concern go?” I cry dramatically.

The President rolls his eyes heavenward. “Shut the hell up. What do you want from me?”

I sigh loudly. “You’re so cold. Why do you assume I want something and I’m not just calling to… uh, catch up?” The snail stares at me blankly. “...Yeah I want something.”

Jonah scoffs. “Knew it. Cough it up, what is it this time?”

“I want a copy of all our new posters!” I proclaim. “I haven’t seen mine yet, aside from a really far away kinda soaked version that I couldn’t make anything out on. So a copy of all the updated Strawhat bounties, please.”

Jonah heaves a sigh. “And you can’t just wait until you get to an island that has one of them pasted to the side of a bar or something?” he complains.

“Nope!” I chirp. “I want ‘em now and I want ‘em crisp!”

Jonah groans, long and loud. “I cannot believe I was actually starting to miss you,” he mutters under his breath.

“Aw, I missed you too, Jonah my darling,” I croon.

“Jonah! Do you have the quarterly numbers done? Warrant officer Byrant wanted to have everything wrapped up to send to HQ before lunch — Oh hey who are you calling?” a new voice says, someone else's face taking over the snail and grinning wide. “You get a girlfriend when we weren’t looking?”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Jonah, baby, you don’t tell your colleagues about me?” I whine, blinking rapidly and trying not to burst out in uncontrollable cackles.

“Stop that! Both of you shut up!” Jonah snaps, the snail going red. That sends me off cackling, same as the other guy on the snail. “This is a professional call! The report is on the table!”

“Oooooh!” the other guy exclaims. “Is this your CP agent? Shit, sorry Jonah. I’ll let you get back to it. I’ll see you at lunch, yeah?”

“Yeah yeah, fuck off,” Jonah grumbles.

“CP agent?” I ask, eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, it’s what the office guys think you are. They wanted to know who the hell I was sending info to, and that’s the conclusion they made up. I’m not gonna correct them,” he explains.

“That’s…” I trail off, “kinda hilarious.”

The snail somehow manages to shrug. “A little. Anyway, I’ll send you those posters. You just want the ones for your crew then?”

I nod. “Yessir!”

“Then I’ll get them to you post haste. Talk to you later,” he says, then hangs up. Yeesh, that guy is great. What a G.

I pack my snails up into the case and venture back to the main deck of the ship with my lawn chair under my arm. “Hey guys! Our posters are on their way!” I announce, invoking cheers from my cremates. “We should totally dedicate a wall in the galley to shit like this. Do we still have me and Luffy’s original bounties kicking around?” I ask.

Nami hums under her breath, sliding her sunglasses up into her hair. “Yeah, I think they’re still in our desk. It’s a cute idea, like a little memento wall.”

I grin and drop my chair beside her. “Exactly! We can put up milestones and shit.” There’s a squawk before a weight lands on my head. I reach up for whatever it is and get a bite to my fingers for my troubles. “Ow!”

“Uh — Ed, you have a bird in your hair,” Nami says helpfully.

I shake my head violently to get the thing off. It squawks again and hops from my head to my chair. “You’re a little shit,” I tell it sternly. It merely rolls its eyes at me and drops an envelope on my chair before flying off. “If those things weren’t so fucking efficient…” I grumble, tearing the envelope open.

Inside are three neatly pressed posters with three familiar faces on them. Luffy’s poster is nigh identical to his first, same picture and everything, except for the shiny new hundred million on his head. Zoro’s bounty has him looking halfway dead due to bloodloss and still looking menacing as fuck.

“Hey, is that…” Nami trails off, pointing to something in the shadows of Zoro’s picture.

“What the actual genuine fuck,” I groan, bringing the poster closer. “Usopp you fucking menace, you’ve done it again! When did they even *take* this?”

Usopp shrieks and dives across my chair to snatch the poster up, his eyes bugging out when he sees. “THAT MAKES THREE!” he cheers, grabbing Chopper and dancing around.

“Make that four,” Robin pipes up from the other chair.

We turn to her where she’s holding my poster and I stick my hands out for it, fearing just what I may see. The first thing I notice is that they updated my photo. Gone is my peace sign picture, and in its place is a new one.

“Aw man what the fuck,” I complain. Zoro peeks over my shoulder and immediately bursts out laughing.

I’m looking off to the side at something out of frame, blood all over my face and cheeks bright red. There’s plumes of smoke and fire in background, as well as Usopp’s stupid fucking nose.

“Are you fucking kidding me.”

“I think this was right after Tashigi saved you,” Nami says, taking the poster for herself. “You have that stupid lovestruck look on your face.”

Zoro groans. “Of all the people, you stop being aromantic for *her?”*

I scowl and jam my elbow into his side. “I’m still aro you jackass, it was just *really hot.”*

“And caught on camera,” Usopp adds smugly. “The whole wide world gets this moment immortalized in paper and ink.”

I kick him. “You’re terrible. You’re all terrible and you don’t love me.”

I’m all but folded in half as Luffy drops down on my back and basically pushes me out of the chair before he grabs onto my legs and pulls me into his lap. “I love you,” he says with all the seriousness the situation demands.

I put my hand on his cheek. “Congratulations on being my best friend, dorkface.”

Luffy, of course, immediately clocks me in the mouth by pumping his arms and whooping.

“OW! I take it back!”

“WAIT NO—”

Chapter End Notes

My hobbies include giving Ed super cool cannons, them promptly taking them back. The lord giveth and the lord taketh away...

I learned a thing that really fucked up a plot point I had planned and I had to switch up some shit but that led me down a very long and convoluted rabbit hole in which I learned Ace's cover page adventure thing (I can hear the anime only fans crying in the distance) takes place in Lulusia Kingdom and promptly lost my shit. Like — that's wild. I didn't know that. Fucking Oda. Did everyone but me know that? Anyways honorable mention of it this chapter because it threw me so hard for no reason.

Here's Ed's updated poster because I have absolutely no impulse control.

Chapter 61: Chapter Sixty One: Who Else Is Gonna Put Up With Me This Way?

Chapter Summary

> *Off to the Races - Lana Del Rey*
>
> “In that case, let’s get a carpenter for our crew! We’ll be sailing for a long time so we’ll need one eventually,” Luffy announces. “The Going Merry is our home! So let’s find a carpenter who’ll treat her right!”

Chapter Notes

> Totally unrelated to the chapter itself and the title choice this time, but Sanji is a Lana Del Rey girlie the same way Nami is a Marina and The Diamonds girlie. They’re both both. Just something I think about a lot.
>
> There's actually three whole chapters with Lana songs for titles this arc, I'm making up for neglecting my girl. Her music just never misses tbh.
>
> I have been fighting off a redux of my Hunger Games hyperfixation with my hands and feet I can't fucking afford that rn. The second I give in is the second I start writing a fic about that too and I frankly do not have the time. Like have I already thought out a concept? Yeah but I refuse on principle to write it. No one tell me to do it istg I will burst into angry tears.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And now for the moment you’ve all been waiting for, time to divide up the loot!” Nami announces as we all erupt in cheers.

“Bronze statue!” Luffy shouts.

“Books!” Chopper demands.

Sanji pulls an abacus out of seemingly nowhere and starts flicking beads around. “New pots and frying pans, plus a giant mouse trap…”

“Booze,” Zoro says with a dreamy smile on his face.

“Enough blankets to fill a swimming pool,” I say resolutely.

“First off, 80% goes to my secret stash…” Nami mumbles with a smirk.

“Wait a minute…” we all protest in unison.

“I’m kidding. As if I could have a stash that big on this shoebox of a ship,” she grumbles. Then she shrugs. “But the money is for her. The old girl needs some TLC ASAP.”

“She needs tlsap? What’s a tlsap?” Luffy asks, tilting his head like a puppy.

“It means we need to fix up our special lady,” I respond, shoving his hat down on his head.

“Oh! Yeah, that’s a great idea!” Luffy exclaims.

“We don’t know how much the repairs will cost, so we’ll split up the rest of the loot when they’re done,” Nami decides. “It’s not like any of us will be left with nothing, based on the amount we managed to bring back with us.”

“I guess even Usopp’s patchwork repairs can only go so far,” Zoro says around a mouthful of bread crusts.

“I’m a sniper, not a handyman,” Usopp snaps, shoving a sandwich into his mouth.

“And yet you’ve done the best you can and we’re all so very proud of you,” I say sweetly, grabbing a sandwich of my own. Usopp sends me the stink eye.

“We should get it into an actual shipbuilding dock and have a specialized shipwright do the repairs,” Sanji says, setting a cup of tea in front of me.

“There’s people better at fixing things than Usopp?!” Chopper awes.

“This ship has carried us all the way from my village in the East Blue. If we don’t reward her properly sometimes, we deserve whatever trouble we get,” Usopp states.

“In that case, let’s get a carpenter for our crew! We’ll be sailing for a long time so we’ll need one eventually,” Luffy announces. “The Going Merry is our home! So let’s find a carpenter who’ll treat her right!”

Everyone stares at Luffy in silence for a second while he tries to sip some incredibly hot tea.

“When he’s right, he’s right,” Sanji shrugs.

“Once in a blue moon he hits the nail on the head,” Zoro sighs.

I run my fingers along the grain of the table. I really don’t know what to do…

“Come to think of it, we really need a musician too…” Luffy mumbles, blowing bubbles into his teacup.

“Shelve that idea for now,” Nami says with disdain.

I pat Luffy on the back. “We’ll get a musician next,” I promise, snickering a little.

He immediately brightens up. “Ok!”

_____

I was serious about the possibility of mixing up my guns, which is why I find myself tucked away in the ship's hold with one of Usopp’s gravers carving shit into the buttplates. In the right I carve the best reproduction of the coin stamped into my spyglass as I can manage, just a nice little homage to pseudo dad/weird uncle guy who’s out there… somewhere.

In the left one I go a little buck wild, it starts with just carving in curved lines but quickly spirals into, well… a spiral. Lines growing from lines and crashing into others, all eventually leading into a vortex in the middle. The lines stretch across the whole thing and it’s honestly just a nice texture to run my fingers across.

After that’s done, I retreat back down into the boy's cabin and curl up on the couch for a nap.

_____

I’m incredibly rudely awoken by my catnap by being tossed onto the floor when the ship bucks. My ass smacks hard into the ground and I yelp. “The fuck?”

“That giant wave is gonna hit you! Turn the helm hard!” I hear Luffy’s voice echo from above decks.

I groan and throw myself back onto the couch, folding the pillow over my head and trying to pass back out. Literally not my problem.

_____

I'm standing at the top of the clock tower in Alubarna.

I turn around, looking for my friends, but don't see them anywhere. I'm completely alone up here. I look back down to the plaza and see it's completely deserted as well. Except…

There's one person standing in the plaza. No distinguishable feature from this height but a stupid fucking frog costume.

Lightning strikes the plaza, I blink and she's gone. A vague feeling like fear dances up through my bones and I slowly turn from the plaza back to the room.

Miss Fathers Day is waiting nose to nose with me. I jolt back and she follows. Red trails down from the gory hole in her forehead and I take another step back from her as my breathing picks up. She matches my steps perfectly so I take one more.

My foot misses the ledge.

I fall from the clock tower.

Her face never gets even an inch further from mine. Her eyes burn the same as her blood which drips warm and scalds the skin of my face. The tower shouldn't be this high. I shouldn't still be falling.

Against all laws of reality, a hand reaches out through the hole in her forehead. It grabs firmly onto my skull with a gloved grip and pushes.

My back slams into what should be concrete but isn't. It's water and my hair, longer than it should be, tangles up around my face. The force still hits me like a ton of bricks and swirls swim across my eyes like stars. I mouth a name I can't say out loud.

I wake up.

_____

My eyes shoot wide open in the semi darkness of the boys cabin. My heart is racing in my chest and my pillow is clenched tight in my hands. I drop it immediately to make sure I haven't torn the damn thing to shreds.

Jesus fucking Christ. I haven't even thought about that since we left Alabasta, what the hell kinda symbolism was ***that?***

I rub my eyes and sit up on the couch. I shake a full body shiver out and take a deep breath, pushing the memory of the dream out of my mind. I haul myself up the ladder and throw the hatch open to climb onto the deck.

"Good morning gorgeous! Can I interest you in a snack?" Sanji sings.

I push out a jaw cracking yawn and wave him off. "Later. Where are we?" I ask, squinting out at the fog over the water.

"Island," Zoro grunts.

I turn to look at him confused, and see the fucking island that was on the other side of the ship and I just didn't see. "Oh. Island. Cool."

Then I look closer. It's an island made up of a prairie as far as I can see, with tall tall trees that almost look like they were shittily stretched in photoshop. Wait…

"Oh my god let's leave. Let's skip this island," I blurt.

“What?” Nami asks incredulously. “We literally just got here. What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s a fucking guy around here and I’d literally sell my left foot to skip his nonsense. Let’s just fucking go.” I take a quick glance around the deck. It's just me, Sanji, Zoro, Nami, and Robin who’s up in the crows nest left on the ship. “Where’s the rest of our chucklefucks?”

“Chopper, Usopp and Luffy ran off. We should probably go after them,” Nami grumbles, adjusting the wristband of her Log Pose.

“No!” I wail. “We’re already too late!”

“What are you screaming for? It’s not like this random can beat *Luffy,”* Zoro mumbles, scratching at the back of his head.

“It’s not about that. This jackass challenges people to Davy Back Fights and our stupid nut of a Captain is dumb enough to agree to one!” I whine.

“Then is now a good time to mention a ship has approached us?” Robin calls from on high.

“Excuse me?” we all blurt at once, turning the other direction. Just in time, too. Two giant paws attached to chains shoot out of the giant goddamn galleon in front of us and latch onto the shore on either side of our own ship, effectively caging it in.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I groan, hanging my head.

“That’s not good, we seem to be blocked in,” Robin muses, sliding down the rigging.

“Who the fuck are you?! Get out here, I’ll kick your ass!” Zoro hollers up at the ship. Nami stomps on his foot.

“We are the Foxy Pirates! We want more than just a fight, we want a duel!” a voice from the ship announces.

“Fuck you!” I shout. “Fuck you and your split head Captain!”

“HEY!” the voice screeches. “WATCH YOUR MOUTH!”

“KISS MY ASS! SCREW YOUR DAVY BACK FIGHT!” I scream, flailing when Zoro has to hold me back from lunging at the ship.

“Davy Back Fight?” Zoro grunts, ducking under my elbow.

“That’s right! And you won’t have a choice once both Captains agree to it!” that voice yells again. “Our Captain is proposing it as we speak!”

“If it’s a fight we accept!” Zoro decides.

“You dumbass, it’s not a fight. They’re pirate games,” Sanji explains.

Robin nods. “That’s right. It’s a tradition that originates from Pirate Island. In order to get the best sailors, pirates stole pirates from each other.”

“Fuckin’ Pirate Island,” I grumble under my breath.

“How can you be pirates and not know that?! A Davy Back Fight is about swapping crewmembers! We challenge you to a three coin game! Three events!” the guy yells again. “The winner of each game gets to pick a crew member who then becomes the loyal subordinate of the enemy Captain, swearing it on Davy Jones himself!”

Wait, is Davy Jones canon in One Piece? I guess that kinda tracks with the *Davy* Back Fight part… but, like, what does that mean for the Deep Sea Lore™ of this world?

“Wait — so playing this game means losing a comrade?!” Nami cries.

“That’s right! And if your opponent's crew has no one you want, you can strip it of its very spirit — it’s Jolly Roger!”

“Your comrades and your pride are on the line. If you win you get strong, but if you lose you lose big time. It’s a vicious game,” Sanji sighs around an exhale of smoke.

“So that ship we came across, the one without sails or a Captain…” Nami trails off.

“So you’ve met the Fang Frog Pirates? They fell victim to our game earlier! Look, they’re our new crewmates!” one of the Foxy pirates exclaims, gesturing to a few people on deck. “They lost five three coin games to us, and lost fourteen crewmen and their flag with them!”

Nami takes a step back. “That’s so stupid! We’d never accept a challenge like that!”

“IDIOT!” the Foxy pirate shouts. “It’s not up to the crew! The game begins when the Captains agree! Cry and shout as much as you want, once the Captain gives the ok, the rest of the crew has no choice but to participate!”

“He’s right, Nami. It’s an unwritten rule amongst pirates, we all agreed to follow our Captain to the bitter end. If we flee this fight now we’d be leaving in disgrace,” Sanji explains.

“So what? A little shame isn’t that bad!” Nami exclaims.

“Maybe for you. I’d rather die than live in disgrace,” Zoro huffs.

“Me too,” Sanji agrees.

“You’re both idiots. Pride should never come before the safety and happiness of the people you care about,” I grumble. I’m ignored.

“What is with you two?!” Nami groans.

“Give it up Nami, men are just like this,” Robin chuckles.

“AAAAAAAUGH! Then I gotta stop Luffy!” Nami declares, spinning on her heel.

“Don’t bother! Simultaneous gun fire from both Captain’s signal the beginning! Stop fussing —” The same Foxy pirate from earlier gets cut off by two gunshots in the distance.

“GODDAMNIT!” me and Nami both shout in unison. I don’t fucking wanna do this shit! Why, why, *why* couldn’t we skip just one arc?!

“Guess we’re doing this,” Sanji sighs.

“Just as I hoped,” Zoro smirks.

“It could be fun,” Robin decides.

“HE ACCEPTED!” the Foxy pirates all cheer.

“This is gonna suck so much…” I whine.

_____

“Say what you want about this fucking disaster, they do know how to appeal to an audience,” I mumble around a chunk of salted meat. The speed at which these loons managed to set up a fairground is actually kinda impressive.

Usopp slaps me upside the head. “Be classy! These people are basically trying to rob us!”

“The opening ceremony will now begin, quiet down everyone!” someone or other yells into the PA system. It does fuck all to make people shut up.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” I grumble, jabbing Usopp with my elbow.

He scowls at me. “I tried! It’s *Luffy!”*

“Alright guys! Cut the chit chat!” a new voice announces. We all look over to the stage where they have Foxy (that son of a bitch) and Luffy set up in chairs with a girl I recognize as Porche speaking.

“Since these folks have never participated in a Davy Back Fight before, we’ll go over the rules! First; whatever you lose in a match can only be reclaimed through the same match, you *can’t* win them back in a future Davy Back! Two; crew members chosen by the winner must immediately swear loyalty to their opponent's Captain! Three; a stolen flag can never be displayed again! Anyone who doesn’t obey these rules goes to Davy Jones Locker as a disgrace to pirates!” she explains. “Do you swear it?”

“I swear!” both Luffy and Foxy proclaim, though Luffy says it through cheeks full of yakisoba.

“On these three coins we declare this Davy Back Fight on!” Foxy shouts, hurling three coins into the open water.

“Who’s Davy Jones?” Chopper asks, eyes lighting up when Robin hands him some cotton candy.

“A pirate from long ago who was cursed by a demon and said to live down on the deep seafloor,” Robin says matter of factly.

“He lives on the seafloor?” Chopper asks confusedly. Luffy jaunts up behind me and snatches my last piece of salted meat right from my hands.

“That's the legend. Any sunken ship or treasure gets locked away in Davy Jones Locker,” Robin continues.

“He keeps everything that sinks to the floor for himself, so pirates refer to taking what you want from your enemies as Davy Back,” Sanji explains. “It’s pirate tradition stuff, like the Laws of the Sea.” That perks my attention right up.

“Laws of the Sea?” Zoro inquires dryly.

Sanji shoots Zoro the stink eye. “You’ve been sailing for how long and you don’t know this shit? Yeesh, the old geezer used to complain about new generation pirates not respecting the code, but damn.”

“So there’s like actual rules and laws and shit?” I ask, stars in my eyes. I fucking *love* shit like this! And LAWS OF THE SEA? *DEEP SEA LORE™??*

Sanji’s face lights up and he twirls over to me. “But of course, my dear! In general, the Laws of the Sea cover basic shit like the code of conduct, burial rights, calls to arms, there’s a whole section about revenge, vows, parley, marriage rights, claiming and such on,” he explains.

“Claiming?” I ask, tilting my head.

He nods, head turning almost unconsciously in a different direction. “Claiming people as your family. Someone dips you in the ocean and claims you as theirs, the Sea bearing witness. Shitty old geezer did that for me,” he admits, taking a long hit of his cigarette.

Aw man that’s sweet as fuck. “Are these Laws something everyone who sails under a Jolly Roger abides by?” I inquire.

He shrugs, blinking a couple times and turning back to me. “For the most part it’s those who’ve sworn fealty before the Sea. Since Gold Roger sent a bunch of wannabe pirates out flooding the ocean with no one to teach them basic shit it’s a little less widely practiced, especially in the Blues and early Grand Line.”

“What kinda numbskull swears fealty to a body of water?” Zoro scoffs.

Sanji immediately kicks his heel out at him. “Shut up, shitty mosshead! *You* did!”

Zoro blocks him. “When the fuck would I have done that?!” he shouts.

“The fucking barrel, right before we entered the Grand Line! Did you think we were proclaiming our dreams for the Sea to hear for kicks?” Sanji snaps back.

“Wait, that was an actual important thing?” Nami blurts. “Did anyone else know that was a thing?”

“I knew,” Luffy pipes up, shoving a whole cotton candy, stick and all, down his throat. “Shanks used to tell me about the Laws and stuff. Don’t remember a bunch of ‘em though.”

I point a menacing finger at both him and Sanji. “You chucklefucks are telling me all about this shit when we aren't about to get semi-consensually kidnapped!”

Both of the boys salute. “Aye aye, First Mate!”

“Hey, do you guys know the traditional rules? You get eight players for three games. Each player can only participate in one game, and once you decide your players you can’t change them!” some random guy shouts at us.

“We get it, get lost!” Sanji shouts back.

Nami and Usopp both crunch their fists into Luffy’s face. “Damnit!” Usopp grunts.

“You’ve really done it this time, Luffy!” Nami snarls.

“We just have to win!” Luffy whines back, words slurred by his face being squished. “If we win we might get a shipwright!”

“We don’t want one of their dumb shipwrights!” Usopp yowls.

“The categories are race, ball game, and battle,” Zoro announces, looking at a piece of paper someone or other gave him. Huh, I didn’t know he could read. “I’ll be in the battle,” he decides.

“What?! NO! I wanna be in the battle!” Luffy protests.

“Nope, leave it to me! I’m rarin’ to go!” Sanji shouts.

After some finagling, a little fighting, and some decisive decisions, we're split up neatly into places in the roster. Robin snickers and holds up the paper. "If it's all decided, I'll submit the list."

Round one has me, Nami, Robin and Usopp participating in the Donut Race. Round two is Sanji, Zoro and Chopper in the Groggy Ring, and the last round is Luffy in the combat round.

"I've got Can't-Do-Races disease…" Usopp mumbles, clutching his stomach.

I smack him on the back. "We've got this in the bag, baby!"

"I don't wanna do this either, so just suck it up," Nami grumbles.

I clap my hands onto Nami and Usopp's shoulders. "Guys! Let's huddle up so I can tell you absolutely everything about these losers!" I announce to my crew.

"You know specific stuff about these guys?" Zoro questions.

I scowl. "Unfortunately. They're dirty fucking cheaters and not a one of them is gonna be playing fair. As far as I know, only one of them has a Devil Fruit. In the first round we'll be up against Porche, some fishman guy I can't remember the name of, and a shark. Like, just a shark. I think Porche is the only one we moderately have to worry about with them, but their fucking splithead of a Captain will probably interfere too."

There's the sound of someone tripping behind me that I ignore. I'm not the only clumsy loser around here. "For the second round it's Hamburg, a big guy named Pickles, and a half fishman half giant guy with a dumb name I also can't remember. He's fucking massive though, and he's slippery as hell cause of the fishman stuff." I'm goddamn amazed about how much of this I remember, given how little attention I paid during this arc. It fucking dragged in the anime and I couldn't be bothered to pay close attention to the manga.

“Last up is their Captain, Silver Fox Foxy. He might be an idiot with a craptastic barber, but he’s got an amazing Devil Fruit and at least a bit of a grasp on how to use it. He can slow things down with a beam you’ve gotta watch your back for,” I explain.

“A BEAM?!” Luffy gasps.

“How do you know all that?!” a screechy voice shrieks.

We all turn around to where Foxy himself is picking himself out of a bush.

My face twists up. “Speak of the roach. None of your business, splithead.”

Foxy falls dramatically to the ground and is ushered away by a couple of his crewmen.

“First is the Donut Race! It’s an obstacle boat race consisting of one lap along the shore! You must make your boat using the materials of two oars and three empty barrels! The use of any outside materials will result in immediate disqualification!” some guy announces into the PA system. “I, Itomimizu, will be your MC conveying information from the sky atop Chunchun, a rare Super Sparrow from the South Blue!”

“Do you guys know how to make a boat?” I ask, kicking at one of the barrels.

Usopp throws his head back and groans. “Leave it to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Me dropping the Deep Sea Lore™ and not mentioning it again as of the chapter I'm currently writing: Oh oops.

I'm really a sucker for it so it's a little sad but the shit's gonna fuck as the shit fucketh's.

Catch me in the corner giving you dream sequences that are always more important than you think. Sometimes I think I'm playing the long game a little too long but then I remember how fucking pissed y'all are gonna be if you ever reread this when it's done and feel better.

Chapter 62: Chapter Sixty Two: My Heart, My Liege, My Second Birth

Chapter Summary

Mi Capitán - Kiltro

“We are so gonna sink,” I say miserably, crouched in half of a barrel and praying my clumsy ass doesn't send all of us overboard at once.

Chapter Notes

I absolutely adore Kiltro and this song embodies the First Mate spirit like no other.

It is so FUCKING COLD where I live. I have get on a bus in the PITCH BLACK and often times in the middle of a BLIZZARD. So winter is going great.

The mental illness was simply too great this weekend and I rewatched the LoTR trilogy. I cried several times. I COULDN'T WATCH THE EXTENDED EDITIONS THO I'M STILL MAD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We are so gonna sink,” I say miserably, crouched in half of a barrel and praying my clumsy ass doesn't send all of us overboard at once.

“Well I’m sorry I’m not a carpenter!” Usopp grunts.

“Wait, is this gonna sink?” Nami doubletakes, stood upright in a different barrel half.

“It’ll definitely sink,” Robin says from her half.

“First up, team Strawhat! Navigator Nami, Sharpshooter Usopp, Archeologist Robin, and Detective E. D. Domino! With their boat, the Barrel Tiger!” Ito-whatever announces from high above us on his Super Sparrow. “Representing team Foxy is our very own idol, Porche! She’s leading the marlin fishman Capote, the acrobat swordsman Yermete, and the start-spotted smoothhound shark Monda! Their boat is the Cutie Wagon!”

“Fuckin’ sharks,” Nami grumbles.

“I love sharks,” I say matter of factly.

“Both teams to the starting line!” Ito-whatever continues.

“We’re going to sink you,” Porche purrs.

“Go ahead and try,” Nami snaps back.

“With both teams at the starting line, I’ll explain the rules one final time! Competitors must make one full lap around Long Ring Long Land! That’s all! Though I might add that lethal weapons of all kinds are permitted use! Pistols, cannons, cutlasses, you name it! Those who flee in fear are a disgrace to piracy!” Ito-guy yells.

Cheering is bombarding us from all sides and I sigh. “Hey Robin, if you fall overboard I’ll save you,” I promise.

“Let’s hope it doesn't come to that,” Robin responds.

Nami grabs one of the ores and crouches down on the opposite side of the craft from Usopp. “If we’re doing this, we’re playing to win!” she shouts.

“It’s ok to sink your opponent, right?” Robin says coolly.

“At least there’s that,” Usopp sighs.

I spin my pistol and smirk. “I didn’t get to do enough fighting on G8, I wanna put these babies through the wringer.”

“Aw, look, they’re trying to big talk us,” Porche croons.

“We’ll send ‘em sprawling into a watery grave!” the acrobat guy who I don’t remember in the slightest hoots.

“They can talk all they want, we’ll sink them in three minutes flat!” the fishman cackles. “Right, Monda?” The shark makes a… shark noise.

“Take these! Eternal Poses so you don’t get lost!” Ito-guy adds just as something drops and bounces off my head into Nami’s hands.

“Ow,” I grumble, rubbing what will probably be a sore spot later. Why would they drop them from that high?

“Get lost? How far out are they expecting us to go?” Nami mutters.

“Hugging the island may be a bad idea,” Usopp offers.

“Be sure not to stray too far from the island, and good luck! On your marks!” Ito-guy starts.

“Why wouldn’t we stay close to the island?” Nami questions.

“We should distance ourselves from the get go,” Usopp suggests instead of answering.

“Get set!”

“Usopp, *why?”* Nami demands.

“DONUT!” Ito-guy screams.

Immediately we’re bombarded by the sound of cannon fire. With barely a second of delay, I’ve pulled my secondary pistol to the front, twisted both dials, and shot a fucking collum of fire at the shoreline. There’s some shouts from the crowd and a scream from both Nami and Usopp.

“GO!” I bark. Oh my god that was *AWESOME!*

“RIGHT!” They yelp. Then we’re shooting off. The Foxy pirates have a little bit of a head start and we start chugging to catch up.

“Robin! Incoming boulder!” I yell.

“Got it!” she responds, lifting her arms up as two more pairs sprout from the palms and shove the boulder behind us, creating a huge wave that only shoves us forward.

“They can attack us from off field?!” Nami yelps, rowing as fast as she can.

“Pirate competitions always have unexpected obstacles!” Usopp responds.

“But if they’re allowed to use outside support, so are we,” Robin states, pointing ashore where Sanji is kicking the crap out of the crispy pirates who fired on us.

“I love that guy,” I say dreamily.

“Eyes on our twelve,” Robin pipes up.

We all turn forward as Capote or whatever performs a karate move at the back of their ship, making the water split as a force rockets towards us. I raise my right pistol, flick the second dial, and send one of Zoro’s sword slashes at the incoming attack.

They impact in between both our ships and send a small wave in both directions, pushing the Foxy pirates forward and stalling us just a little. Actually, it sends their acrobat swordsman guy right into the water. He gets left behind, poor fucker.

Robin crosses her arms and the retaliating attack Capote was gearing up is abruptly stopped by her wretching his arms apart and putting him in a submission hold. Then she bends the poor fucker in half.

“Now’s our chance! Usopp, you swim and pull the ship!” Nami orders.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Usopp shrieks back. The announcer guy says something else I don’t pay attention to. “I’ve got an idea! Wind dial!” Usopp announces, sticking said item in the water. Nothing happens. “Ok that didn’t work! Moving on!”

I scuttle to the back of the craft and shove Usopp into my spot. “Someone make sure I don’t go flying off the front of this bitch!” I demand.

“Hah?” Usopp squawks.

I twist the dial on the end of my right pistol and set off the impact dial with a shot into the water. My arm nearly leaves the socket, but it does send us skipping across the water past the

Foxy team, all my own teammates screaming around me. Except Robin, she's cool as a cucumber.

I crack my gun down against the side of our 'ship' as hard as I can without smashing the damn thing. "Let me know when you're ready for more!" I announce with a grin.

"You won't get away that easily!" Porche's voice cries from closely behind us. They closed the lead in virtually no time at all.

"How's this?" Robin asks, growing arms out of her own until they catch the side of the other craft.

"Good idea Robin! This is easy!" Nami cheers.

"You sneaky jerk! Let go!" Capote yells, lunging out for a swing at the arms.

Robin disperses them in an instant, sending the guy into the water. "Oops. Guess they noticed."

Announcer guy suddenly starts screaming. "An obstacle appears! It's Long Coral Reef, and beyond that awaits Long Cape and the Long Ring Whirlpool! How will the teams get through!" The Foxy team pulls ahead of us. "OH! What's that I see?! There's someone on the island!"

"Is that their stupid looking Captain?" Nami asks.

"Unfortunately," I grumble.

"What is this? The coral juts up so high…" Robin murmurs.

“Look at those weird currents around them! We shouldn’t go in without thinking,” Nami suggests. I’m keeping my eyes trained firmly on Foxy and Hamburg as they bound along the shore. Nami stops rowing as we near the edge of the reef.

“Nami? Row!” Usopp yelps. We all watch as the Foxy team goes sailing into the reef and immediately gets rebuffed and shot back out by the currents. “Is that normal?”

“Nope! I’ve got it! Full speed ahead!” Nami announces. Usopp starts rowing again without any further questions.

Because I had been keeping an eye on him, I see the second Foxy fires an arrow at us. I fire a totally normal pistol shot back at him, and miss horrendously. The good news is that I hit the arrow instead, so that’s nice. “Let’s all pretend that was what I meant to do!”

A thick white cloud spreads from where the arrow exploded, but we pay that no more heed. Nami navigates us swiftly and precisely through the coral reef, no rowing necessary.

“How’s the ship moving on its own?!” Usopp yelps, tucking himself into the barrel as we pick up even more speed.

“It’s a current maze. The whirlpool on the other side is creating a bunch of smaller whirlpools inside the reef. If we enter at the right spot, which we did because I’m amazing, the currents carry us right through,” Nami explains with a grin. “We never even need to see the other side.”

“Our navigator is so cool!” me and Usopp cheer in unison.

Then we shoot out of the coral reef directly towards the giant whirlpool and the cape. “Ed! Impact dial, now!” Nami commands.

I weep for my poor shoulders, but flick my dial and aim my gun into the water regardless. Nami taps my hands and points my gun a little lower and winks at me as I fire. We shoot not

just forward, but up in the air and over the cape. I mean, it fucking hurts and Chopper is gonna have a field day with me later, but totally worth it.

We splash down into the water on the other side and zoom forward. A sign comes into view that says ‘Donut Race go right.’ “Okay! We’ll go right then!” Nami says cheerfully. “NOT!” Then she punches the sign out of the way.

Weird tall bursts of water spray up from the shore that we clear with ease. We speed along until the fake goal is in sight. Nami punches it out of the way. “I TOLD YOU THAT WOULDN’T WORK!”

We keep chugging as fast as we can, even when the other team stops at the false goal. “If we lose to these jokers I’ll be embarrassed,” Nami mutters.

“Not to mention they’ll take one of our crewmates,” Usopp adds.

“I’d feel bad for the poor fucker,” I agree. Our asses are winning this shitshow and then Chopper will never have to go over to them, the sweet boy.

“I can see the finish line!” Nami suddenly announces. Indeed, the goal is just up ahead, beyond a small cape covered in bamboo. Bad news is the other team is catching up real fast. “Usopp, knock over that bamboo!” she orders.

“You got it!” Usopp shouts, firing at it without hesitation.

We zoom past the grove and the large stalks of bamboo fall right on top of the other team as they pass it. “Bingo!” Nami cheers. Then Porche is shooting flower knives at us though, so that’s less bingo. We all duck down into the barrel halves.

“There’s a hole in the ship!” Usopp announces. “It’ll probably hold?”

“The goal is right there!” Nami shouts, pumping her arms faster.

I’m keeping my goddamn eye on fucking splithead as we near the goal, standing for a better vantage point, planting one foot on the edge of the barrel, and readying my pistol. The other team are closing in and the cheers from the crowd are deafening, not to mention how loud Ito-man is screaming into the PA.

“Fuck you!” I shout as I see Foxy’s hands come up for his fucking beam thing. I aim my pistol and—

A wave smacks into the side of our shitty vessel and my foot slips off the edge.

“Oh shit—”

The good news is I don’t immediately fall right into the water. The bad news is I don’t do that because we’re hit by the fucking slow-slow beam. I just kinda… slowly… fall into the water. It’s really goddamn annoying, especially since my mouth was stuck wide open the whole time and I get a mouthful of ocean water when we finally speed back up.

Someone grabs the back of my shirt and hauls me back into the ship. I spit out the mouthful of water as we head for the shore.

“Sorry guys,” I mutter. I get a pat on the back for my troubles.

“Fehehehehehehe! Now we get one of your crew members!” Foxy laughs.

“Nami, Robin, Ed, Usopp! What happened!” Luffy shouts, running to meet us at the shore.

“Are you alright?!” Chopper shrieks.

“My bad. We’re fine. Even knowing about that dumb fucking beam didn’t save me from my own two left feet,” I grumble, wringing water out of my everything.

“WE WON THE DONUT RACE!” Foxy cackles, running over to us.

“The first round is over! Now time for the much anticipated spoils of war!” Ito-dude announces. Shit, man. At least we can still win Chopper back. I do feel pretty bad though… “Choose one person you want from their crew! Do the honours, boss!”

“The first one I want…” Foxy shouts. Yeah, I feel real bad for Chopper. “IS YOU!”

…Wait a goddamn second.

“Detective E. D. Domino!”

Well fuck.

_____

I slap the hands that try to force me along off and walk my damn self over to the stage. I may lack pride, but I still have dignity.

“Wh — ED?!” all my friends screech. Chopper literally falls to the ground screaming.

I’m ushered onto the stage while Foxy cackles and resist the urge to strangle him. I wonder if that’s a big no-no in those Laws Sanji was talking about? Would that be considered regicide, or just plain ol’ fragging?

“You’re our detective now! Swear allegiance to me and put on this mask! Feheheh!” Foxy proclaims, gesturing to where Proche is approaching holding the mask out like she’s trying to muzzle me.

She shoves me down into the chair and I scowl at her. “You’re not the cute little doctor, but you’ll do,” she sighs.

I snatch the mask out of her hands. “If you try to play dress up with me up I’ll bite your fucking fingers off. You’re super cute by the way,” I reluctantly shove it on my face and lean back in the chair, bored, and turn to Foxy. “I swear loyalty to you, or whatever.”

There’s cheering from the Foxy Pirates and I sigh, leaning on my hand. This is gonna be a long wait. Chopper’s wailing only gets louder.

“Ed!” Nami shouts.

“I’m sorry we lost, Ed!” Usopp shrieks.

“Splithead!” Luffy growls.

Chopper’s crying reaches ear splitting levels. “BUT ED’S OUR FRIEND! I DON’T WANT THEM TO LEAVE!” he screams. My heart clenches hard in my chest.

“Stop blubbering Chopper! It’s humiliating!” Zoro suddenly snaps, voice clear and loud across the fairground. He slams a bottle of booze into the ground and gets to his feet. “The choice to become a sailor was Ed’s, and Ed’s alone. Anywhere they end up is their own fault!” He doesn’t bother turning around. “We accepted the challenge! They gave it their best and Ed fucked it up themself!” I shrug a little. That’s pretty fair. “Pirates have no pity for a crybaby! If you’re a man… then act like one. Do as Ed’s doing and see this fucking thing through,” Zoro demands.

Chopper's crying ceases. "Hey! That's mean, think how both Ed and Chopper feel!" Nami berates. Chopper sucks all his snot back into his nose, wipes all his tears off, and goes stoic. Nami blinks at him a couple times.

"That's better," Zoro states approvingly.

"Well said, temporary First Mate of the future King of the Pirates. And I do mean *temporary,"* I pipe up, giving him a hard stare. Zoro gives me a solemn nod.

"King of the Pirates?" Foxy mutters under his breath.

"I thought the swordsman already was the First Mate?" Porche says in a confused voice.

"First Mate's *my* job," I snarl at her. If people keep making that fucking mistake I'm gonna lose it.

"Not anymore It's not!" Foxy cheers, slapping a hand on my shoulder I shrug off. "Now detective! Tell me all about your former crewmates and their abilities!" he orders. I bristle *hard* . The fucking *audacity* .

I slowly point to each of my friends. "Swords guy, rubber guy, kick guy, weather girl, hand girl, little furry," I drawl.

Foxy does a double take and his face goes red. "What?! That's it?! You were so much more detailed with my men!"

I give him a death glare that makes him shrink back just a bit. "Let me make something very fucking clear. You may have my loyalty, but my respect is something earned, not freely won in some cheap game. Now I'll be taking a nap to acquaint myself with the ship. If you'll excuse me, *Captain,"* I spit, rising from my chair and stalking off the stage toward Foxy's ugly ass ship.

“Wha — that’s not how this works?!” Foxy shrikes.

“What, never met someone with standards before, splithead?” I shoot over my shoulder.

He all but wilts. “Porche, please show our new crew member to the ship and keep an eye on them,” he says miserably.

Porche comes jogging up beside me as I walk. “That was very rude to your new Captain,” she huffs. I roll my eyes.

She leads us up the side of the ship to a steep ramp, then carefully guides me across the deck and down into the ship. She has to pull me out of the way of weird shit more often than not, and it’s gotta be a fucking miracle none of their crewmates die just getting up to go to the bathroom at night.

“He’s not a bad guy. A lot of the people on his crew want to be here,” she suddenly pipes up.

I scowl at my shoes. “Sure, maybe. But I don’t. All I know about him right now is that he’s taken me away from the people I love for his own self gain.”

Even if it’s temporary, it doesn't feel good at all.

“You might be happier here, or at least content,” she offers.

“Without *my* Captain? Fuck no I won’t,” I mutter.

She huffs again and comes to a stop. She swings open a door, catching the bucket of water that falls from above it expertly, and ushers me inside. “You said you wanted to take a nap?

These quarters should do. I'll fetch you when the round is over." She points at me sternly. *"Don't* go anywhere. You could get hurt."

"You got it," I say lazily, saluting her and sitting down on one of the bunks that looks like it's not in use.

She heaves a sigh, then closes the door. I listen to her footsteps as they retreat, then wait a minute after the silence.

Time to fuck shit up.

Aight, I don't remember half the traps on this ship and I'll probably die or get caught trying to disable any of the ones I find, but c'est la vie. I slowly crack open the door, on the lookout for that fucking bucket Porche took down, and find it sitting innocently beside the door.

I hook a right to go the opposite direction Porche went and step deftly over a tripwire strung across the hallway. "If that's the worst of it, this'll be easy," I mumble to myself.

Spoiler alert, it's not easy. It's not easy at all. There's more tripwires, a fucking spike trap, an entire pit of hot oil, eight more buckets on top of doorways, whatever that crazy buzzing thing was, and even worse shit.

"This sucks," I mumble miserably. "I shoulda just taken that nap."

I jump over another tripwire, ducking under an axe that swings across the room at the same time. Unfortunately, I land on a floorboard that fucking immediately falls away and dumps me in the corner of another room. I smack my nose hard off the metal surface of the floor and groan.

Where the… Wait — Oh I know where I am. It's that stupid reflective room Foxy traps Luffy in. Lucky break, I guess. I just shoot in the mirror wall and waltz over to the weird punching machine thing.

“Parkour!” I whisper to myself, climbing up the boxing gloves. I hop up into the cockpit thingy and start looking around for a hatch of some kind.

I find what I’m looking for on the side. I jam my penknife into the crease, then pry that bitch off. “Here goes nothing,” I huff, then start pulling wires out and cutting them. That should do at least something. How do I get out now..?

I kick around on the walls until something shifts. I pry the hidden door open and go into the hallway it leads to. The hallway is, blessedly, void of traps. It leads to a ladder I climb up, which opens up from a hatch into what might be a kitchen, might be a storage closet. It’s hard to tell.

Actually, it is a closet. A big ol’ walk in one, too. Except instead of being full of clothes, it’s full of really shitty costumes. Well I’m just getting extra lucky now, aren’t I? I shove them all in a sack that’s conveniently in the corner and drag them with me.

The room actually leads into a kitchen, guess that’s why I was confused. I open the first drawer I see and steal a handful of cutlery. Because I can. “I love stealing, I love taking things,” I hum under my breath, exiting the kitchen.

The real question is gonna be if I can get my ass back to the room Porche put me in. Oh wait, I recognize that pit of boiling oil. I drop the sack in it, circumvent it, and continue back down the familiar hallway to my temporary quarters.

It’s a shame I didn’t find everything but eh, I’ll take what I can get. I jump the tripwire and silently open the door, slipping inside and sprawling across the bed in a ‘damn I’m napping good’ position, cheek smooshed into the pillow and limbs akimbo.

Just in time, too. A knock sounds on the door and Porche’s voice comes from the other side. “Detective? The round is wrapping up, are you awake?”

I groan, long and loud into the pillow. The door cracks open and I flip over, yawning and rubbing at my eyes. “It’s over already? Damn, I was hoping my boys would draw this shit out longer, this bed is surprisingly comfy,” I murmur, sitting up.

Porche frowns at me. “We don’t know who’s won yet, don’t get your hopes up.”

I rock to my feet and laugh. “No, we’ve won,” I say with certainty.

Porche continues to frown as she leads me back up through the ship and into the fairgrounds. “It’s a tremendous victory for the Strawhats!” Ito-man screams through the PA. I shoot a smug look at Porche just to make her face screw up. “The Strawhats, victors in the second round, now have the right to take one of the Foxy pirates or their flag! Who will the Captain of the Strawats choose?”

“You know who!” Luffy barks. Aw, I’m touched. “E—”

“Luffy, wait!” Nami interrupts. My forehead ticks. As much as I appreciate Nami’s cunning mind, I’m sick to death of this goddamn mask. “Round three is one-on-one combat, right? Why don’t we just take their Captain so they have to forfeit? There wouldn’t be anymore fighting *and* we’d get Ed back.”

“PEANUT TACTICS FROM THE MONKEY’S TEAM!” Ito-guy screams at the top of his lungs. I smack my hands down over my ears and resist the murderous urges. He continues to badmouth Nami, cajoling the crowd until they’re chanting “PEANUT!” while Nami cries into Robin’s arms.

“Shut your mouths already! Stop getting carried away!” Nami suddenly snaps, the entire crowd immediately ceasing and apologizing.

“Whether it makes us laugh or cry, the decision is up to the winners Captain, Monkey D. Luffy. Who will he choose?!” Ito-guy proclaims.

“GIMME BACK MY DETECTIVE *NOW* SPLITHEAD!” Luffy shouts.

I swipe off the crappy mask and throw it at Porche. “It’s been real,” I say sarcastically. She scowls at me. I saunter up to my friends and let Luffy engulf me in a hug. “Dude I felt like I was cheating on you, calling that fucker *Captain.* Gross,” I mutter into his chest.

“Yeah, no more of that. I wanna be your only Captain,” Luffy grumbles.

I throw my head back and laugh. Possessive little shit. “Aye aye, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Feheheh! Are you ready for round three, combat? I should warn you, winning against me is impossible,” Foxy boasts after working himself out of a depressive slump. “Any crew member acquired in the final round can’t be won back! I could pick anyone, so pack your bags!”

“I’m not gonna lose to you!” Luffy proclaims.

Foxy huffs a grave laugh. “There’s a difference between combat and playing a game.”

Chapter End Notes

Catch me making up a side character who exists only to get left behind simply so I can put Ed in the race.

I don't think I'm gonna make it to winter break. I'm gonna freeze to death first. That or school's gonna get me.

Bouta go draw nakey people live model drawing is so fun.

Chapter 63: Chapter Sixty Three: This Is My Commitment

Chapter Summary

Get Free - Lana Del Rey

“Dude, they have funnel cake. Call them what you like, they’ve definitely seen heaven,” I announce, sitting next to Zoro in the little section of the stands we’ve claimed as our own.

Chapter Notes

I've had a tummy ache all weekend and I've been very brave about it. Can I have a round of applause, please. It's been a real inconvenience, I have soooo much shit to do it's not funny.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And now the round that you’ve all been waiting for, single combat!” Ito-seriously-what-was-his-name announces. “Now let’s choose the field!” We all look to the cannon Luffy and Foxy are rapidly spinning, which jerks to a halt pointing right at Foxy’s ship.

“Wait a second, that wasn’t a natural stop!” Usopp squawks.

“It’s kinda funny how little they care to hide their cheating,” I muse.

The cannon fires somewhere onto the deck of the ship. “By chance it happened to land on the deck of our own ship, the Sexy Foxy!” Ito…mi-something? Is that it? shouts.

I fold in half at the waist laughing. “That’s the best name for a ship *ever!* Oh my god can we rename the Merry?!”

Usopp smacks me on the back and nearly sends me sprawling on the ground. “NO! Merry is a classy lady, unlike that monstrosity!”

Itomimi-something continues to explain the rules over the PA while Chopper goes about cleaning the boys up. “You look like you got your ass beat,” I say, hip-checking Zoro’s head.

He scowls up at me. “Shut up. You wouldn’t know, your bitchass was apparently napping the whole time.”

I smirk down at him, eyes gleaming. “Was I?” He frowns.

“Ed dearest! I fought my very hardest to get you back from that splitheaded menaces clutches!” Sanji sings, leaning so far over he nearly falls. Chopper smacks him on the leg to get him to stop.

“I fought too,” Chopper says moodily.

“Yeah, Chopper. You did good,” Zoro sighs, submitting himself to Chopper’s doctor whims.

“Aw I’m sorry I missed it, I’m sure you were absolutely amazing!” I coo, picking Chopper up in a hug while he screeches.

“That doesn’t make me happy, damnit! Put me down, I'm working!” he yodels, steam practically billowing out of his ears.

“Are they building stands over there?” Sanji asks, pointing to the apparent construction in front of the ship.

“There’s warm up matches already happening as well,” Robin observes.

“They’re not very good,” I point out.

We just kinda watch these losers duke it out while the stands are built and the perimeter is set. I slip away at one point to go get some more salted meat. And more yakisoba. And a churro.

“Dude, they have funnel cake. Call them what you like, they’ve definitely seen heaven,” I announce, sitting next to Zoro in the little section of the stands we’ve claimed as our own.

“I could make better, and it wouldn’t cost 1,000 berri,” Sanji grumbles from a couple seats over. I pass him the bundle of silverware I stole from the ship as an apology for… I dunno. Being disloyal to his cooking.

A couple cannons fire some weird black shit into the sky. As the field darkens, a light clicks on and displays both Foxy and Luffy’s bounties against the backdrop of the sky. I didn’t know this world had projectors, but ok.

“Introducing the competitors of today's match, a battle of the Captains!” Itomimi… zu? Maybe? hollers. “First, introducing the man who never turns down a fight, who’s won 920 consecutive matches, the man who wins *every* game! Entering from the left corner of the foxes head… our boss, Silver Fox Foxy!”

There’s a burst of smoke accompanied by the clanging of bells, then Foxy steps out and the crowd erupts in cheering. His jacket is gone and he’s strapped up with boxing gloves I know aren’t regulation. I lean back away from the guy sitting beside me as he all but collapses, foaming at the mouth in excitement and… Jesus, I think he fainted.

“His opponent hails from the East Blue, the leader of a small group of pirates, the man with a hundred million bounty on his head! Entering from the right corner, he’s known as Strawhat, Monkey D. Luffy!” Luffy steps out onto the fox head in a cloak, music playing from fucking somewhere, before he throws the cloak off.

“Oh my god,” I mumble, slapping my hand over my forehead.

“Oh my *god,”* Nami curses in disbelief.

“OH MY GOD!” Sanji and Chopper both scream, awe pouring off them in waves.

“What the fuck is he wearing?” Zoro gapes.

Luffy is wearing an afro three times the size of his head. I’ll tell you what he isn’t wearing though, a goddamn shirt. Tiddies out on a Sunday afternoon, bare chesting it for the world to see. He’s got some kinda flaming skull Jolly Roger emblazoned on his chest and is donning a pair of boxing gloves as well. Usopp is right behind him, wearing Luffy’s hat and dressed a little less flashy but no less stupidly.

“You look so cool, Luffy!” Sanji and Chopper scream together.

“Dear god,” I mutter. “I love that man more than life itself, but *fuck* if he doesn’t have a hole where his brain should be, even under that afro.”

“You’re tellin’ me,” Zoro mutters back.

“And now the main event you’ve all been waiting for! Both contestants have stepped foot on the battlefield!” Itomimizu (yeah that’s probably right) proclaims.

“I can’t believe he chose Usopp as his corner man,” Zoro complains.

“Yeah, I mean, I’m super motivational. I would have been a great choice,” I agree.

He jams his elbow into my side. “Not what I meant and you know it.”

I lean my cheek on his shoulder with a catty grin. “Oh I know. You wanted to be corner man because you’re a nerd at heart. It’s fine, you’re still the most specialest little guy to me.”

“I’m not a nerd, *nerd!”* he squawks back.

Itomimizu starts announcing something or other that we both ignore.

“Whatever you say, *nerd,”* I snicker.

The stands shake a bit before raising. We don’t pay a whole lot of attention to it.

“So how’d you like being First Mate? Did you feel the crushing weight of responsibility while you were fighting? Did it fit like a glove? Did it feel like a missing piece of you was restored?” I needle, poking him on his bandaged forehead.

Zoro groans and pushes my face away from his. “I thought we got over this after Shell Town. Not my job, not my problem. It didn’t feel like shit or fuck, I didn’t even have to do First Matey crap.”

I pout, using his hand as a headrest. “What even counts as First Matey crap?”

He drops his hand and I smack into his shoulder with a yelp. “You tell me. It’s *your* goddamn job. How about you, huh? You enjoy working under a different Captain?” he inquires.

A gong sounds, probably signalling the beginning of the match.

“I wasn’t even on their crew long enough to take an order aside from the one you watched me take. And did you see my face? I was very clearly not pleased,” I tut, ripping one of my pieces of salted meat in half and handing him part.

Zoro snorts and tears into the chunk. “No kidding, I thought you were gonna snap and tackle him.”

“I certainly fucking thought about it,” I say cheerfully. We both laugh.

“What made you respect him?” Zoro suddenly asks. I furrow my brow at him. “Luffy. You said your respect was earned, so how’d he do it? You joined the crew first, so I don’t know how it happened. When we first met you said it was coincidence and happenstance,” he elaborates.

Huh. Good point. I turn back to the match just as Luffy gets caught in a slow-slow beam upside down in midair. Fucking idiot. “He saved me from drowning in the middle of the ocean,” I supply semi unhelpfully.

Zoro’s eyebrow arches hard. “That’s it? That’s all it took?”

I chuckle a little. “Nah, that wasn’t it. He’s just…” We watch him go flying off the side of the ship with the force of thirty seconds of stored up beating. I laugh, clear and loud. “He’s just such a good dude!”

Zoro shoots me an amused look. “So he just plucked you outta the water, probably said something both stupid and deep and that was it for you, huh? Seems about right.”

I jab him with my elbow. “I don’t wanna hear that from the guy who let himself get shanghaied into this mess. Besides, there was a little more nuance to it than that.”

“What the hell is shanghaied?” Zoro asks, nose scrunched up. “And what nuance?”

“It means getting conned into being a sailor,” I respond, taking a huge chomp of my churro. “And yaknow, I had just been unceremoniously ripped away from everything I knew, then bam. Here’s this goofy ass weirdo who not only is interested in what I have to say, but

actually wants me around? For fucks sake he gave me a purpose so I didn't get lost in the sauce of grief. Of course that was it for me."

Zoro gives me a long look. "I didn't realize that shit happened to you so… recently."

I shrug. "It is what it is. Say, Zoro. Does it ever bother you that I'm above you in the chain of command? Just because I'm so much weaker than you."

Zoro groans again. "How many times are you gonna bring this up?"

I smack him. "Answer my question, buttface!"

"Did you just call me *buttface?!"* he sputters. "And no! I don't give a rat's ass! Don't make me repeat the whole conversation we had back in that dumb dingy before we met Nami. Strength is not equal to respect yadda yadda yadda. Get that through your thick skull," he berates, smacking me repeatedly on the head.

"I get it, I get it!" I squawk, ducking away from his evil man hands. Shit is blowing up on the deck of the Sexy Foxy in the background.

"Do you? Cause you keep bringing it up!" Zoro antagonizes, hooking one arm around my neck and rubbing his knuckles into my head with the other. "I'm happy with my job on the crew, why can't you be?"

I stop struggling. Why *can't* I? Zoro's made it super clear he doesn't want the damn job, and it's not like it's changing anything about his character, as far as I've seen. He's still dumb strong loyal Zoro.

I relax in his arms and reach up to pat the muscle. "Alright dreamgirl. You win."

“Dreamgirl?” Zoro scoffs, loosening his hold, but not protesting when I don’t move. “And… Good. We both got roles we fulfil, and self-doubt isn’t a part of your job parameters. You plan, Luffy punches shit, and I’m here to back you both up when things go sideways.”

I sigh contently. “I know. I trust you’ll always be there when I fuck up, whether to kick my ass, save my ass, or both. You’re a reliable dude like that. I respect you a lot.”

“I respect your brain, even if it’s dumb sometimes. I respect how you’re always trying your best to help us,” Zoro admits. Then he tilts his head to stare right into my eyes. “But let’s get one thing straight. You ever stop improving, you ever stop trying to be stronger and better than you are now, I don’t care how I feel about the position, I’ll kick your scrawny ass out of it.” He grins a shark toothed smile at me. “You ever stop striving to be better than I am, I’ll be on your ass like a demon straight from hell.”

He lays it out like a threat, but… Yeah. It just feels like reassurance.

A massive explosion rocks the Sexy Foxy. Me and Zoro look at each other then back to the fight. “He’s fine,” we say simultaneously. Our crew all start freaking out though. Their screaming immediately turns to cheering when Itomimizu announces Luffy is fine.

“You wanna make a bet on who’ll win? It’s been a while,” I suggest.

Zoro shakes his head. “You know as well as I do that Luffy’s gonna win. No point to a bet like that.”

I hum. “Fair enough. We’ll have to find something else to bet on soon, I miss holding stuff over your head.”

“Hey,” he grunts.

Luffy goes running into the ship and we lose sight of him.

“You too,” I blurt. Zoro looks at me confused. “If you ever stop striving for your goals or do something to sabotage yourself, I’ll come at you like a feral raccoon. It’s only fair,” I explain with a sideways smile.

Zoro scoffs a laugh and shakes his head. “Whatever you say.”

There’s a long moment of silence across the stands. We can’t really see into the ship, so there’s not much to cheer for.

“So… you think this’ll take long?” I whistle through my teeth.

“Luffy won’t lose like this,” Zoro states.

“Right! This is Luffy we’re talking about!” Chopper squeaks from his other side.

“Luffy… with an afro!” Usopp adds with all due seriousness.

“Luffy is more than that stupid fox can handle,” Sanji huffs.

“Why would that dumb afro help any?” Nami mutters incredulously.

“He did look cool though,” Robin chuckles.

The deck of the Sexy Foxy explodes. We all freeze. When the smoke clears Foxy is standing over Luffy, who’s literally plastered in blood and sprawled across the ground.

“Mamma mia…” I mumble.

Everyone but Zoro and Robin promptly loses it. The cheers from an overwhelming part of the stands make my stomach turn and I send Zoro the most flat faced eye roll I can manage.

"Look," Robin suddenly speaks up.

Luffy has risen to his feet, albeit shakily, and already has his dukes back up. Unfortunately, Foxy is the worst man alive and puts him back on the ground with his stupid fucking beam. I guess I should just be thankful it's this utter jackass in possession of his Devil Fruit and not someone much much worse.

Usopp tries to hop the rails. "That beam's gotta be against the rules!" he shrieks. Zoro jolts forward to stop him. "He's practically killing him!"

It's fucking vile, and I'd be lying if I said watching my favourite person in the world getting the absolute crap beat out of him by a scrub wasn't making me more livid then I've felt in days, but…

But Luffy stands the fuck back up. He stands the fuck back up and announces, "I won't lose… a single member of this crew… even if it kills me!" with his whole chest, so sure and sincere it takes our entire crew aback.

I… I've just been relaxing and shooting the shit this fight because I'm so fucking sure he'll win and I don't even feel like I have to worry, but… Luffy is fighting his ass off out there to give me that certainty.

"Strawhat… Strawhat Luffy is back on his feet!" Itomimizu screams in the PA.

Chopper and Usopp are full on crying. Nami is yelling his name. I grab hold of Zoro's hand. He gives me a nod and squeezes it. Everyone in the stands is cheering Luffy's name. *Everyone.*

“How dare you cheer for my opponent!” Foxy screeches, so loud it can be heard from the stands.

The crow immediately switches back to chanting for Foxy, the fucking cowards. Luffy gets hit with another of Foxy’s dumb beams, then Foxy fires a cannon that he attaches to a… fox airplane thing? That he slows down?? Fuck, this guy is so goddamn *weird.*

“Dodge! As soon as the beam wears off, dodge!” Sanji shouts, his cigarette falling out of his mouth somewhere amongst the stands.

Luffy suddenly moves again, but it doesn’t mean much. The plane speeds up and Foxy absolutely cold cocks Luffy, then jumps off the plane which *also* hits Luffy, and then fucking *explodes.*

Good lord, if nothing else this fucker’s thorough.

But Luffy gets the fuck back up again. He meets Foxy blow for fucking blow, no hit going unpunished. We all watch with bated breath as Foxy tries one more slow-slow beam and everything freezes.

Luffy drops to his knees. Foxy stays stock still. I throw my head back and start laughing. How the shit did he even get a chunk of mirror in his afro when I destroyed the mirror for him? Luck of the fuckin *gods* I tell you.

Luffy struggles to his feet and starts winding his first up like a fucking fail, gearing it back and socking the slowed Foxy square in the face with all the force of a speeding train.

The crowd sucks in a breath and holds it.

Luffy walks forward on shaky legs, climbing up onto the figurehead of the Sexy Foxy while Foxy himself’s face slowly starts compressing.

“Eight more seconds,” Zoro pipes up, hooking my arm into his and patting my hand.

“What?” Usopp gapes.

“Seven,” Sanji continues.

“Hah?” Nami mumbles.

“Six,” Robin adds.

“Five,” I sing, unable to keep the messy grin off my face.

Everyone starts counting down with us.

“Four!”

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

“ZERO!”

Foxy goes careening off into the air while Luffy throws his arms up and shouts his victory. The Strawhats all burst into cheering, some of the Foxy pirates following until they clock just what's happened. Foxy's body splashes into the water outside the confines of the arena.

"The boss's streak of 920 consecutive wins has been broken… and the winner of this game is… STRAWHAT… LUFFY!" Itomimizu announces, sounding so far past bewildered I'm surprised he hasn't fallen off his bird.

Our cheering gets ten times louder. "GET FUCKED YOU LOSERS! STRAWHATS FOR THE WIN!" I holler, shaking Zoro back and forth much to his disgruntlement.

"Wait! We have to go save boss!" The Foxy pirates scream, all of them rushing towards the front of the stands together. The sudden shift of weight makes the front supports snap and the entire stands go crashing towards the water.

"MOTHERFUCKER—"

———

"I gotta be honest, I didn't love that," I announce, flopping onto the grass beside Luffy's bandaged up and sleeping body. I wring my soaking crop top out onto the ground with a wet splash and stretch out my arms. "I miss when swimming was a fun recreational activity and not a literal fight for my life in the great pirate soup."

"You did not just call it the great pirate soup," Zoro says in complete dismay.

"I mean… a very watery soup, but a soup no less…" Sanji mutters under his breath. Zoro's face somehow falls further.

Usopp crouches to the ground beside me. "He really is so reckless," he cries, poking at Luffy's bandaged face before Chopper slaps him away.

“He makes us worry so much! Where’s his afro power now?” Nami complains, also crouching.

“Nami, you shouldn’t diss afros,” Sanji says disappointedly, dropping to the ground beside her.

I snicker and lean back. I look around at my crew as we all take a second to decompress, waiting for our Captain to wake up. Robin is standing with a faint smile on her face, and Zoro is beside her with his hands in his pockets smiling too. I spend a long moment just looking at Luffy’s face.

“You know what?” I decide. “I am selfish.”

Nami and Sanji make matching upset sounds. Zoro just groans. “What is it with you and rehashing conversations today? Do you need a hard smack to the head or something?”

I laugh. “Nope! I’ve just — It’s not a bad thing anymore. I don’t *feel bad* about it anymore. I’m selfish as *fuck* and more than a little possessive, granted not nearly as bad as our dear Captain. Like with my position. It’s super important to me, not because of the position itself mind you, but because of y’all. When it comes to you guys… It just feels good, yaknow? You’re *my* friends. *My* family. Because I’m yours. It just… feels good,” I explain lamely, a small smile on my face.

There’s a moment of silence across my friends. Then Chopper, Usopp and Sanji all burst into tears. I startle back as Nami basically throws herself over our Captain to tackle me in a hug. “That was the nicest thing you’ve ever said! I love you so much!” she wails.

“What?! No it’s not! Don’t say that, people are gonna think I’m mean to you guys!” I squawk, falling backwards as more of my friends pile in on the hug.

“Are we hugging? WAIT! THE GAME!” Luffy suddenly shouts, jolting upright. We all separate to turn to him.

“You won. Don’t worry,” Zoro says, trying to pry Usopp off his leg. When did he even get over there..?

Luffy immediately flops back down onto his back with a huge relieved smile. “Oh, good.”

“I wasn’t worried at all,” Usopp sniffs, rubbing his snot on Zoro’s pant leg and giving Luffy back his hat.

“Liar,” Sanji snorts.

“I thought about it. There’d be no point being a pirate if it wasn’t on this ship,” Zoro decides.

I throw my head back and laugh. “Goddamn Luffy, you got the whole crew feeling sentimental!”

“Boss! You shouldn’t move yet!” someone in the crowd shouts.

We all spin with hands on our weapons as Foxy steps up to our group. “Hey, Strawhat. You dared to besmirch my perfect record,” he says, voice made nasally by the cotton rolls shoved in his nose. “Well done… brother.”

And he holds his hand out. Luffy reaches back. Porche and Hamburg start snickering.

“Yeah right! Super vengeance shoulder throw!” Foxy shouts, spinning around and heaving. All he really ends up doing is slamming his head into the ground because Luffy’s arm simply stretches to accommodate the pulling.

“What an idiot,” Zoro scoffs.

“He’s just… so pathetic it’s hard to be mad,” I admit.

“Well, you know the deal! Now hurry up and choose! Who do you want from my crew!” Foxy snaps, red from embarrassment.

“Indeed! It’s time for the final switch! Choosing rights go to the winner, Monkey D. Luffy! Word is he needs a carpenter. Does that mean he’ll pick Sonie, head of all fifty carpenters on the crew? Or the fighting carpenter Donovan? Maybe Gina, the sexy carpenter?” Itomimizu shouts. “Whoever it is, Luffy is free to choose! Make your decision!”

“Gimme your Jolly Roger!” Luffy demands.

“WHAT?!” the whole of the Foxy crew screeches.

“Hey, Luffy! You sure?! What about the sexy carpenter Gina?! Won’t you regret this?!” Sanji squawks, flapping his arms.

“If I actually get what I want, I’ll forget why I accepted this in the first place,” Luffy announces.

Nami heaves a sigh of relief. “Thank god.”

“Do you have no scruples about snatching away the very symbol of pirate pride?!” Foxy screes.

“Don’t worry about the sail. You kinda need it to… sail,” Luffy says with a shrug.

“But the sail has our symbol, and we can’t display it..?” one guy pipes up.

“Alright… It’s just a symbol, I’ll paint you a new one so I don’t hafta take the whole sail,” Luffy offers.

Foxy’s eyes shine as Luffy starts jautning towards the ship. “Strawhat, you’re so…”

I clap my hand onto his shoulder and give him an evil grin. “Don’t celebrate until you see it. This is more of a punishment than a mercy.”

He gives me a weird look. Idiot.

“There!” Luffy calls a few minutes later, showing off his truly horrendous work as the Foxy pirates collapse in a horrible depression.

The pirates all file back onto their ship with looks of disdain thrown at the sail. “The victory goes to the Strawhat crew! That concludes this Davy Back Fight!” Itomimizu announces for the last time.

As the ship starts pulling away, the giant paw things that had been trapping our ship finally release. “Hey Strawhat!” Foxy screams from the ship. “We’ll remember this!”

“What a weird group of pirates…” Zoro says dryly.

“Let’s do our best to never see them again. Ever,” I say sagely.

Everyone nods along.

Chapter End Notes

Zoro and Ed and their 0% hesitation ride or die attitude with Luffy is my Roman Empire. They are literally cheerleaders with weapons, never forget that.

The next two chapters are both gut punches so look forward to those :).

Chapter 64: Chapter Sixty Four: I Fucked Up I Know That, But Jesus

Chapter Summary

Mariners Apartment Complex - Lana Del Rey

I wave my hand. “Eh. Pirates. Besides, they led me onto the ship after I blatantly disrespected their Captain and expected me *not* to break some shit? Unrealistic.”

Chapter Notes

Buckle up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walk back to Tonjit’s, the guy who’s horse got shot and caused Luffy to get us into this whole fucking mess in the first place, is filled with conversation and soft laughter.

“And then an anvil, an honest to god *anvil* dropped from the ceiling right in front of me. A hair away from taking my damn nose off! I'm telling you the only inspector who would pass that place as up to code would be one that didn’t make it to their tour,” I explain, gesticulating wildly while Robin smiles fondly and listens.

“Splithead was soooo mad when his weird punching machine in his broken mirror room wasn’t working,” Luffy laughs, hefting the Foxy Pirates flag higher up on his shoulder. “I thought he was gonna start crying.” I throw my head back and cackle.

“It seems even when we were apart you were watching our backs,” Robin hums. “Not very sportsmanlike, to sabotage your opponent like that.”

I wave my hand. “Eh. Pirates. Besides, they led me onto the ship after I blatantly disrespected their Captain and expected me *not* to break some shit? Unrealistic.”

“I’m still mad we lost that first round at all,” Nami says dejectedly. “This could have been over so much faster. Why are you so damn clumsy Ed?”

“Hey! We just went over how cool and awesome I am! Don’t go fucking up my image!” I whine. “But you’re totally right. There’s something deeply wrong with me and I’m sorry it cost us the game.”

“Worry not, Detective. It all worked out in the end,” Robin comforts with a snicker.

I lean dramatically on her arm. “Oh Robin, you’re the only one who truly understands me. Where would I be without you?”

“A splattered smear on the forested ground of Upper Yard, I imagine,” she hums back.

I pause for a second. “Alright you’re not wrong but that doesn’t make you right.” Robin laughs and it makes me laugh too. I wrap my arm around hers and kick Usopp in the back of the knee. “Let’s not forget the fact your shitty barrel boat actually held together. I don’t know what god you were blessed by but they have my thanks.”

Usopp puffs his chest and smirks. “I know! I’m incredibly, truly. The hands of a deity, I’m telling you!”

“Careful baby, you’ll have us all struck down for blasphemy,” I joke.

“Seems we’ve arrived,” Robin pipes up.

Indeed, we’re coming up on a long hut with the guy and his horse in front of it. “You people…” he mumbles in awe.

Luffy holds the flag in front of him. “We kicked their asses!” he announces with a smile.

Tonjit blinks at him. “...You’re injured.”

Luffy just laughs. “We’re used to it!”

His face breaks into a grin. “...Thank you.” His long horse thing neighs in agreement.

“I’ll tend to your wounds again, Sherry,” Chopper says, trotting over and getting to work.

Nami sighs, a small smile dancing on her lips. “So that’s why you accepted the challenge. Although you probably would have done it anyway.”

“Show some respect!” Luffy grumbles.

“If only we could take you to where the village has moved,” Nami says regretfully.

“But since all the islands are connected the Pose can’t latch onto any of them,” Usopp adds.

“Don’t worry about that, we’re very patient,” Tonjit says. “So these are your comrades? You came all this way, please come inside. You’re most welcome,” he offers, making his way around the house.

“But you won’t have anything to eat, right? No more cheese please!” Usopp groans.

I laugh and tug Robin with me as we follow after him. She smiles lightly down at me and I give her a big grin.

Tonji makes a grunt sound and gasps. “A person? Has he been here this whole time?”

“Huh?”

My stomach solidifies and my smile dies on my lips.

“Who are you guys?” Admiral Aokiji drawls, lifting his sleeping mask with a single finger. He towers over all of us at nearly ten feet tall and surveys us lazily, his Marine jacket under one arm.

Robin rips her arm out of mine and stumbles back, tripping and landing hard on her ass.

Everyone goes on guard with barely a millisecond to spare. My hands freeze halfway to my guns, shaking like I’m on my eighth cup of coffee.

“Oh my, you’ve turned into a pretty woman… Nico Robin,” Aokiji drones.

“Robin, you know this guy?!” Luffy shouts, arms twitching as he drops into a crouch.

Aokiji almost chuckles. “We go way back.”

Usopp draws back his slingshot. Zoro’s hands go white knuckled on his swords. Sanji’s already got his leg half up.

“Oh my, don’t look so murderous, my friends. I’m not here on orders. The weather was nice so I’m simply taking a stroll,” Aokiji explains leisurely.

“Orders?! Who do you work for?!” Zoro snaps.

“The navy. He’s Admiral Aokiji from Marine headquarters,” Robin stutters out.

“ADMIRAL?!” everyone screams, jaws dropping. I keep mine clamped tight.

Fuck fuck fuck *fuck.* Once again my stupid fucking head is fucking stupid and forgot a FUCKING ADMIRAL. HOW DO YOU FORGET A WHOLE ADMIRAL? THE *FUCK?!*

Everyone is still talking. Robin is explaining shit, Usopp is screaming, Aokiji is hitting on Nami — oh, now everyone is screaming cool awesome great.

“Hold on now, did you even hear what I said? I was just on a walk. Don’t get so upset,” Aokiji placates, giant hands held in front of him. *Fuck,* I can’t get over this guy’s height. Like, heights in One Piece are crazy just to think about. But *seeing this shit?* “Besides, you guys are… uh… nevermind.”

“What’s with this guy?! Hey Robin — are you sure you got the right guy?! There’s no way he’s an Admiral!” Usopp squawks.

“Hey hey, never judge a book by its cover,” Aokiji admonishes. “My motto is Lazy Justice.”

“We figured!” Usopp and Sanji snap.

Aokiji sighs. “Anyway, let's… Oh man. Sorry, I’m so tired of standing…” he mumbles, slumping down on the ground. “Anyway, I don’t intend to capture you at all, so don’t worry. I just came here to verify Nico Robin’s location after she disappeared from Alabasta. As I expected, she’s with you guys.”

My throat feels tight and cold. Can I get us out of this? *Should* I get us out of this? Seeing how we measure up against someone with real power is important, but that’s kind of hard to

agree with when this slenderman looking fuck is setting off every single warning system in my body at once.

“He really is a lazy guy,” Sanji grumbles.

“At least he has the audacity of an Admiral,” Usopp scoffs.

“I figure I should at least report it to headquarters. Since you added another member with a price on their head, your total bounty is… uh… 100 million, plus 70 million, plus 60 million, plus 79 million… yeah I don’t know. It’s a lot,” Aokiji says flippantly.

“Add it up,” Zoro snaps.

I clamp my hand down hard on Luffy’s wrist as he starts moving aggressively. He looks back at me confused before stopping short. “We’re not gonna let him take Robin,” he declares, furrowing his eyebrows.

“He’s not here to take Robin. He said he wasn’t,” I squeeze out. “There’s no way in the *nine hells* could we fight this guy now and win.”

“Yeah, what they said,” Aokiji sighs. My nails pinch into Luffy’s rubbery skin. “If you’re gonna be like that, I’ll just leave. But before I go… I overheard earlier while I was asleep,” he lazily points a finger at Tonjit, “you… Get ready to leave right now.”

“Wha — You don’t have to listen to this guy! He’s with the Marines!” Luffy shouts, looking back at Tonjit imploringly.

There’s a long moment of silence.

“...Isn’t that a good thing?” Tonjit says slowly.

Luffy blinks. “Shishishi, oh right. We’re usually the bad guys and the Marines are good,” he laughs.

“Don’t laugh at a time like this!” Usopp hisses, smacking him on the back.

Aokiji’s eyes briefly skim over me and I feel all my brain function cease. His mouth is moving, so he’s obviously talking, but I can’t hear anything. Dear fucking god he’s not even looking at me anymore, was one glance enough to melt my brain? I don’t know if I can do this. If only being in the presence of an Admiral level threat is enough to render me useless, what fucking hope do I have of surviving this thing to the end?

Someone's hand lands on my shoulder and all my muscles lock up. My arm lashes out without a second thought and a second hand grabs my wrist before it can connect with anything. I look back with wide eyes and Zoro slowly lowers my arm.

“We’re moving, let’s go,” he says quietly, an unreadable look on his face.

I nod numbly and take a glance around. The rest of the crew are already a ways away, following Aokiji. Tonjit has an entire cart loaded up with all his shit and the horse. I blink, *shit* I hadn’t even noticed they left. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Zoro tugs me after them by the wrist. “Robin knows this guy, do you?” he says under his breath.

It takes me a second to get my tongue to move. “Not personally, no. But I know how fucking out of our depth we are,” I breathe back. His mouth turns down and he stops.

“Alright, we’re here,” Aokiji announces. “This is where the tide recedes and opens up a path once a year… right?” The grassy plains slowly transition into a stonework ramp that descends down below the shoreline, with two columns with flags on either side. “Hard work is nice every once in a while…”

“Yeah! You say right things sometimes!” Luffy laughs, crouched on top of the cart.

“Thanks for all your help, you want some cheese?” Tojit offers.

“Don’t give him that!” Usopp squawks.

“Guess they ended up getting along…” Nami mumbles.

“So what next? You gonna pull everything and swim across?” Luffy asks as Aokiji ambles down to the water.

“Nah. Everyone stand back a little…” he mumbles, crouching down and sticking a hand in. The surface of the water suddenly surges as a giant Sea King bursts from the waves with giant chompers wide to eat the Admiral.

Everyone starts screaming some variation of “HOLY SHIT!” and “GET THE FUCK AWAY!” while Aokiji remains totally chill.

“Ice Age,” he says forcefully, and everything freezes. Literally. The Sea King and the whole sea, as far as the horizon, turns to solid ice. The temperature drops so fast I snap my hands up to grab at my arms, Canadian genes be damned.

Everyone takes a giant step back and our jaws fucking drop. “Holy shit,” I choke out. Nothing and I mean *nothing,* not reading the manga and not watching the anime, could have possibly prepared me for the sheer scale of what this monster can do.

“This is the power of an Admiral…” Robin mumbles at my side.

There's cracking sounds as Aokiji removes his frost covered hand from the ice and stands, a cloud of white condensation rising as he breathes out. He turns and walks past Tonjit and the rest of us, frost flaking off his clothing as he moves. "This'll hold for a week, you can take a leisurely walk to meet your people. It'll get cold… so bundle up."

"Am I dreaming?" Tonjit breathes out. "We can cross the ocean and see our friends after ten long years..?" He spins around and throws his hands up as tears spring from his eyes. "You! Thank you! It's a miracle! Thank you!"

Aokiji doesn't bother to turn around, just scratches at the back of his head and waves.

After putting a coat around the horse and getting one for himself, Tonjit starts pulling the wagon/sled thing across the ice. "We'll be going now!"

"Good luck, guy and horse!" Luffy says cheerfully, pulling me onto the ice to say goodbye. I don't even take a step, I just slide across. Man I was never good at skating, and with how bad my balance is now, I'll probably never be.

"Sherry, make sure you get that bandage changed," Chopper demands. The horse neighs in agreement.

"I don't know how to thank you all, if you hadn't come I'd probably still be stuck on those stilts. Thank you! I'll never forget this!" Tonjit exclaims, waving goodbye before turning and starting his journey.

Everyone shouts goodbye until the two of them disappear over the horizon.

"Ah! That's so great, just great," Luffy laughs, pulling and sliding me back off the ice. He rubs at his arms while his teeth chatter. "It's so cold, like winter!" He comes to a stop as we notice Aokiji sitting on the ground, head tilted and resting on his hand while he watches us. "What?"

Aokiji sighs, scratching at his head. “How do I put this..? You’re just like your gramps, Monkey D. Luffy… You’re wild, you have no self control…” he intones.

Luffy flinches, sweat breaking out across his face. “Gramps..?!” He scuttles backwards until he bumps into me.

“Luffy’s grandpa..?” Usopp mumbles quizzically. He gives Luffy a weird look. “Dude, you’re sweating.”

“I owed a debt to your grandpa a long time ago… I came here to get a glimpse of Nico Robin… and you,” Aokiji continues, staring us down through his lashes. “But I changed my mind… Maybe you guys better die now.”

A chill sweeps across the group. I take a singular step back.

“The government still doesn’t take you seriously, but I can see your crew has grit. Though your numbers are small, a group of troublemakers like you are bound to cause problems in the future,” he states, not bothering to move from his cross-legged position. “I know all the details, from the first bounty to your exploits, and how quickly you’ve grown in strength. I’ve faced a lot of outlaws over the years… and you guys are starting to scare me.”

“W — why are you saying this now?! I thought you just came here for a walk!?” Usopp screams frantically, waving his arms in a panic.

“The most important reason I consider you lot dangerous is because of you, Nico Robin,” Aokiji declares, the slow lazy quality of his speech all but gone.

“So you *are* here for Robin! I’ll kick your ass!” Luffy snarls.

“The amount of a bounty doesn’t just reflect the strength of a criminal, but also the danger they pose to the government. That’s why a bounty was placed on your head at only eight years old,” Aokiji explains like Luffy didn’t even speak. “I’m impressed you were able to

survive, especially as a child. You betrayed, used, and turned on anyone who took you in. With that cunning you survived in the underworld, and now you've hidden yourself in this crew."

"Shut up," I whisper.

Usopp sends me panicked eyes. "Ed, stop," he hisses under his breath.

"No, Ed's right! This guy needs to stuff it! Just what the hell's your problem with Robin?!" Sanji snaps.

"I have nothing against her. If I have any connection to her at all, it's that I once let her get away. That was a long time ago," Aokiji says, expression solid as the ice behind us. "You'll find out soon enough, you'll realize just what a troublesome woman she really is."

"Shut the fuck up!" I yell. "You don't get to tell us Robin is trouble just because you met her when she was a kid! Do you honestly believe we give a rats ass what she's done with her life to get here?! All we care about is that she is! That she was alive to make it to *us!"*

This is stupid. This is so goddamn motherfucking stupid. I'm gonna get myself killed. But… Goddamnit Robin is my fucking friend and if this jackass wants to talk about her like that right in font of her, he's taking what he's giving. I know he saved her but that doesn't give him the right—

"Ed!" Usopp hisses again.

"You think being up on your high fucking horse, watching her from your perch gives you even the slightest inkling of how she feels?! You could map out every single person she's ever thrown under the bus right here right now and it wouldn't change a goddamn thing," I spit, vitriol flowing like a riptide.

"Detective Domino…" I hear Robin behind me, sounding terrified out of her mind.

“Are you done?” Aokiji says admonishingly.

“Not even close. You Marine bastards are all the fucking same — she was a child! You assholes are supposed to protect kids, that’s your *job* dickhead! So you don’t get to berate her for doing what it takes to survive in a world where you pieces of incompetent shit abandoned her!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

Aokiji stands up. I take a step back.

“You’ve been shaking since I arrived, are you scared of me Detective E. D. Domino?” he observes.

I laugh incredulously, one hand clamping down on my other wrist. “Of course I am! Do you think I’m an idiot?! Don’t get it twisted, it’s not just because you’re strong — though you undoubtedly are — you’re a fucking *confusing ass* guy!”

“Detective stop…” Robin breathes from behind.

Aokiji looms high over me. “Is that so?”

I think of him in a hat cape and ruffled shirt, working under a man so vile I somehow manage to make myself angrier just thinking about him.

“Yes! What the fuck is going your your mind?! Your motivation is batshit on a good day, and your brand of justice is bullshit! Lazy Justice?! Gimme a break! You’re one of the strongest people the World Government has to offer and you can’t give half a damn to solve any real problem! Maybe if you acted on your shit justice instead of sitting on your ass something would get done!” I shout, fists clenched so tight I feel my nails pierce through the skin of my palms.

Aokiji simply stares at me for a second. “Family resemblance, huh?” he mutters, then sighs. “I guess I’ll start with you then, Detective Domino.”

Then he lunges for my throat.

“ED!” I hear Robin scream.

Aokiji’s palm meets my skin and everything goes cold and black.

———

When I open my eyes I’m greeted by Usopp’s face above mine. When he notices I’m cognizant his entire face goes lax in relief. I try moving my hands and find I can’t. I’m so so so cold.

“What..?” I croak, unable to feel my jaw moving.

Usopp’s expression pinches and his face turns ever so slightly guilty. “Aokiji,” he says simply, voice scratchy.

Aokiji..? Oh—

“Oh,” I squeeze out, “oops.”

I promptly burst into tears. My teeth chatter loudly as fat tears roll down my cheeks and I blink rapidly so I can keep a blurry view of Usopp.

“Chopper! Chopper Ed woke up!” Usopp yells panickedly over his shoulder. He turns back to me and his hands hover hesitantly before he throws caution to the wind and wraps his arms

tight around my shoulders in a hug.

My chest heaves. “I’m sorry,” I sob loudly into his neck. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry *I’m sorry—”*

“Stop,” Usopp begs. “Stop apologizing.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again, wishing I could move my stupid fucking cold arms to hold him back. My breathing is going so fast, but I keep the phrase on repeat.

Sounds are going fuzzy as Chopper rushes into my view. He says something or other that I don’t understand and I feel vibrations through mostly numb skin as Usopp responds.

I’m so stupid. What evil fucking brainworm made me think lecturing an Admiral would get me anywhere? What made me think that would help anybody? Robin certainly isn’t going to cope with this better having watched me get turned into a popsicle. Aokiji isn’t going to change any of his ideals.

Someone wraps the comforter from the bed around my shoulders. The black spots dancing across my eyes make it hard to tell who.

“I’m so sorry,” I sob with everything I have.

What a fucking let down.

———

I wake into the quiet of the night. I can hear snoring from a couple different sources as my senses click into place. A dull ache engulfs my entire body, and my head pulses faintly. I feel like I just spent a couple hours too long playing in a snowbank in the thick of a Canadian winter.

One of Luffy's rubbery arms is wound up around my own, and I take a look around. I'm laid out a mattress in the galley, same as Luffy and Robin, and the rest of the crew is strewn about. At a closer glance, I realize Robin is awake and staring blankly up at the ceiling.

She suddenly moves. She sits up and gets to her feet. I shut my eyes and feign sleep as she starts to glance around. I hear her soft, near silent footsteps cross the room, then the quiet sound of the door opening and closing.

When I reopen my eyes, she's gone. I sit up and shiver as the blankets fall away from my upper body. I gently pry Luffy off of myself and rise to my feet. I walk across the floor and as quietly as I can and retrieve a glass of water. I chug it down, pour a second glass, and chug that too.

I hear the faint sound of running water from somewhere else on the ship. Guess Robin just stepped out for the bathroom. I place my cup in the sink to wash later, then make my way back to the bed situation.

I drop heavy into the mattress. I wrap one of the blankets around my shoulders and shiver again. My hands still feel numb and I rub them futilely trying to chase the phantom cold away.

Robin slips back inside the galley a second later and stops in her tracks when she sees me awake. For a second she looks like she's just going to turn right back around and leave.

"Robin," I call softly. She stops again. "Join me?" I ask quietly, holding a hand out. She looks ready to refuse. "Please?" I beg.

Robin sucks in a sigh and slowly crosses the room, delicately taking my hand. I shuffle over to the edge of the mattress, nearly flush with Luffy's own, and gently tug her down. She kneels down on the other end, an unreadable look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. I don’t bother trying to hide my expression. I feel vulnerable, flayed open. “That was *really* fucking stupid of me, and it wasn’t my place to speak on your behalf. I put us in a lot of danger, mouthing off like that — you especially.”

Robin’s mouth twists up. “Please don’t apologize to me,” she whispers, sounding like this is horrifying her. “This is all my fault, don’t apologize to me.”

“It’s not your fault,” I deny. “You aren't responsible for the actions of others, and you certainly aren’t responsible for me running my mouth.”

Robin doesn’t say anything but shakes her head. I shiver. Robin hesitates for a second before grabbing a second blanket and draping it across my shoulders, then softly guiding me to lay down.

“Go to sleep, Detective,” she whispers.

I grab her hand before it can retreat. “You too,” I whisper back. Her face pinches. “Robin, sleep,” I urge, tugging her hand.

Robin lets me pull her onto the mattress proper. She props her head up on an elbow and we watch each other for a long second. Then she sighs and runs her fingers through my hair. I close my eyes and lean into the feeling.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” I murmur, feeling the pull of sleep tugging down on my bones again.

Robin murmurs something back, but I’m already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Ed be like *forgets important canon even* oops *forgets important canon even* oops *forgets important canon even* oops—

Ed yelling at people who could kick their ass is a personality trait. A very sexy one.

Next chapter is going to wring you dry emotionally but there's roast beef so it all averages out. Like, really *really* good roast beef.

Chapter 65: Chapter Sixty Five: Love Is Concentration

Chapter Summary

I Dropped Out - And The Kids

I groan quietly into my pillow before untangling myself from Luffy, snagging one of the blankets as I go. I stumble over to the desk and make contact with Nami's bleary eyes as she blinks at me from her hammock. I give her an apologetic look and make my way up to the deck with Transponder case in hand.

Chapter Notes

Fun fact this song is my top listened to this year at 722 plays. Also I'm fucking psychotic and my total minutes was 160,245 and I have seen no one come close to it and now I'm beyond horrified with myself.

This chapter is... uh... Well go get some water before diving in. Take care of yourself and always remember you're the person you'll have to live with for the rest of your life, so you should always come first and making decisions that benefit you but not the people around you is ok. Boom life advice and wisdom with Aachria.

I'm on my last week of classes for the semester and I will make it if it kills me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Our first day anchored off the shores of Long Ring Long Land is spent in quiet rest. I keep myself confined to the bed under a mountain of blankets, Luffy joins me for half that time before he seems to regain enough energy to start bouncing around the ship like usual.

Day two I get myself set up nice and cozy on the deck in a lawn chair, blanket over my shoulders and a book in hand. Sanji brings me so many damn cups of hot tea he has to be physically restrained.

Luffy also has to be physically restrained because he keeps trying to go for impromptu swims, and by that I mean he keeps trying to interrupt my quiet time and I keep trying to throw him overboard. Look I'm allowed to have moods, shut up.

Everything still kinda aches and tingles and I have a little bit of difficulty turning the pages of my book, but Chopper assures me it'll pass. He finds it remarkable how fast I'm improving, especially since Robin is still being semi confined to bedrest. Luffy is up and being a psycho though, the fucking maniac. All in all, a lovely day with nice weather and some down time that was sorely needed.

We've stashed the mattresses away and gone back to our usual sleeping arrangement, which is why I hear my transponder go off from its case in the dead middle of the night.

I groan quietly into my pillow before untangling myself from Luffy, snagging one of the blankets as I go. I stumble over to the desk and make contact with Nami's bleary eyes as she blinks at me from her hammock. I give her an apologetic look and make my way up to the deck with Transponder case in hand.

I sit down, back to the rails, get the snails out and answer them without further delay. "What's good?" I mumble into the receiver. There's just heavy breathing on the other end for a long moment. "...Hello?"

"Ed?" Ace's voice answers, a near whimper.

It's got me shaking my sleep off and on guard in a second. "Ace? What's wrong, are you ok? Are you safe? What happened?" I spit, possibilities running through my mind each worse than the last.

"I'm safe," he stutters out, breathing still heavy. "I — I don't know what — what's wrong."

"What do you mean, are you hurt?" I ask, staring at the President's eyes as they dart around.

"No. No, I — uh, I think I'm having a panic attack?" he says breathlessly. "I — I don't know. It's like, really hard to breathe? And — and I — *Oh god,* fuck I'm gonna pass out. Ed I'm gonna pass out."

“Shit — ok alright. Deep breaths, don’t make that face I know it sounds fucking dumb when you don’t feel like you can breath, just try,” I instruct. “How long has this been going?”

He takes a stuttering breath and makes a distressed noise. “A — couple minutes, maybe? I — I dunno. Didn’t know what el — else to do, so I called you.”

I hum. “Alright. Panic attacks only stay at their worst for maybe ten minutes, it’s gonna be fine. Can you tell me five things you can see?”

He makes a confused sound. “W — why?”

“It’ll get you to focus on something else. Five things you can see,” I repeat.

“Um — Uh, the Transponder? Er, the sea I guess. Striker. There’s a Sea King over that way. T — the stars,” he recites with only mild difficulty.

“Good. Four things you can hear,” I continue.

Ace takes as deep a breath as he can. “Water. I can hear the water. That Sea King is making a weird noise. W — wind. You.”

“Three things you can feel.”

“Boat. Transponder. There’s fucking crumbs on the seat from dinner,” he pushes out.

“Almost done. Two things you can smell,” I encourage.

“Salt. Smoke,” he answers.

“And one thing you can taste,” I finish.

“Cinnamon,” he sighs.

“Perfect,” I praise. “Better?”

“A little. Fuck — *fuck.* I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have bothered you. Shit, what time even is it?” he curses, voice edging back toward panicked.

I start backpedalling. “Whoa, whoa, no. Ace, I’m glad you called. Who gives a shit what time it is? I could have just not answered the snail if I didn’t want to be bothered, I don’t give enough of a shit to spare someone's feelings like that.”

Ace is quiet for a second. “Fuck, ok.”

“Now how can I help? What do you need from me right now to make it better?” I ask.

There’s another long moment of silence punctuated by Ace’s still slightly uneven breathing.

“...Talk. Just talk,” he pleads.

I smile. “Yeah doll, I can do that. So while we were up on the sky island I made friends with this little girl Aisa, she was such a sweetheart she gave me a packet of sunflower seeds after I mentioned once that I loved them. I was gonna plant them up where Nami has her tangerines but that doesn’t actually seem like a smart idea so I think I’m gonna hold off until we get more planters or something…”

I ramble on like that for a few minutes, whatever I can think of.

"...and then we all almost drowned and I had a revelation about the true meaning of loving and being loved and the nature of belonging which was really fun — I've realized it's a good thing I'll never get into a romantic relationship because I'm a clingy bastard. Anyway, that's my last couple of days, void a few events."

"...Ed," Ace interrupts for the first time since I started talking, "why do you sign off with 'I love you' every time you call me?"

I pause. "Because I love you?" I say slowly. Are the pieces not clicking with this man? What part of me waking up at ass in the morning to calm him down from a panic attack is he not getting?

"Why?" he asks incredulously.

"You fucking moron," I sigh, shaking my head. "I don't need a reason, lameass. You fishing for compliments? You can just ask and I'll hype you up, bro. I love you because you're alive dude."

Ace's expression is confused and a little bit scared. Aw shit, am I coming on too strong again? Wait — Aw fuck wait no these are his self worth issues.

"That's — whatever," Ace mumbles. We stew in silence for a second. "Hey Ed," Ace starts carefully. "What would you say to the son of Roger?

Well fuck. He's going there.

"Uh — I don't know? Hi? Hello? What's the scenario? Is he trying to kill me? Befriend me? *Seduce* me?" I joke.

“Ed!” Ace snaps. I quiet down. “I’m serious. What would you say.”

I suck in a breath through my teeth. “Fuck if I know, dude. Unless the guy has built his whole personality off continuing his fathers legacy I don’t see why the whole son part matters.”

“What does that mean?” Ace hisses.

I shrug a little helplessly. “We’re not defined by our blood. Our *fathers* don’t define us. If nothing else I feel bad the kid didn’t have his dad in his life I guess? Couldn’t have been easy.”

“That’s not what you’re supposed to say!” Ace snaps. “You're supposed to say he’s an irredeemable demon and should be tortured until he’s dead — or better yet, never been born at all!”

Good sweet white lord Jesus the self loathing is DENSE.

“Don’t tell me what to say like some automated response puppet. And what the fuck was that? That’s a vile thing to say about a child. No one is born just to suffer then die, no one deserves that,” I say with a scowl.

“I DO!” Ace shouts. *“I DESERVE THAT!*

My breath catches.

I — Jesus. It’s one thing to hear this shit being said by a voice actor in an animated show, it’s an entire other to have someone you care about say something like that with such conviction.

“Ace,” I whisper.

“I deserve it, I’m evil and cursed — the son of a demon. I don’t deserve to be alive,” he says desperately.

He sounds like he’s trying to convince me, it makes me sick to my stomach.

“Ace,” I say again, slightly louder.

Ace continues like he didn’t hear me. “I have no right to exist — not with what I took out of the world for being born. I wasn’t worth the cost. I should’ve never been born I should have just *died—”*

“ACE!” I scream. “SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

He does. There’s a bang below decks and I realize screaming in the middle of the night was not my best move.

“Ace,” I repeat quietly. “Who the fuck told you about Roger, and who the damned *Christ* told you having his blood made you evil?”

Ace lets out a sharp gasp. “Everyone,” he says, sounding completely defeated. “Random guys in bars when I was growing up.”

My mouth twists up. “Oh so you’re taking the word of guys who wouldn’t know a real pirate if one bit them on the ass?” I spit. “How much do you wanna bet not a single one had ever even so much as seen him? You’re getting your account of him from *that?”*

The snail’s face scrunches. “Does it matter?” he says snappily. “He was a fucking awful guy and the world is better without him.”

“Ace shut the hell up,” I hiss. “Gol D. Roger was an incredible man, and before you decide you hate his guts maybe you should speak to somebody who actually knew the

motherfucker."

"Why would that change anything? Just so I could get firsthand accounts of how much he sucked?" Ace retorts.

I take a deep breath, stand up and pace out a circle, then sit back down. "Alright you little shit, it's not my job to fix your daddy issues. You don't have to like the guy, fuck it you can hate him for the rest of your life, but at the very least try to understand the man before you demonize him. Don't let World Government propaganda go to your head."

The snail scowls at me. "Where would I even start with that," he mutters glumly.

I roll my eyes. "You ever talked to your gramps about him? If you're feeling bold, Dark King Silvers Rayleigh is on Sabaody. Crocus of the Twin Capes knew him. For the love of god go talk to your pops about the guy, half of your crew knew him personally," I list. I pause for a second. "…Have you talked to the Whitebeards since you left..?"

Ace is quiet for a second. "…No. I've been too scared they'll manage to convince me to leave what I'm doing and get help," he admits softly.

I scowl at him. "Call them. Ask about Roger — they may say some unflattering things and call him an idiot, but at least they'll be honest."

I… I couldn't possibly tell him what was asked of me right now. It would fucking break him.

Ace makes some grumbling noises. "What if I don't *want* to understand him?"

"Then stew in your hatred and let it destroy you," I say without hesitation. "But his shadow will follow you for the rest of your life if you keep it up, is it really worth agonizing every time you hear his name?"

Ace is quiet for a second. “I don’t even want to be associated with him,” he says, near silent.

"Old people always try to compare you to other old people and dead people, attaching a legend to you makes you more impressive and easier to digest,” I sigh, leaning back against the rails. “Do you have any idea how many people compare Luffy to Roger? It's kind of ridiculous. Everyone is their own person, free of the burden of their legacy. It's just a matter of if you see it like that or not."

Ace’s face twists up in disgust before it settles into something resigned. “I don’t know if I can believe that yet,” he admits.

I shake my head. “It’s not something that’ll click after a single conversation. Even if you just come away from this wanting to change the way you think in the slightest, I won. It… it’s really hard to realize you aren’t at fault for being born the way you were,” I whisper.

The President blinks up at me confused for a second. “Personal experience?” he questions with trepidation.

I lean my head backwards and watch the reflection of the moon off the water for a second. “My dad didn’t like me very much. At least, not once he got to know me. Which really sucks, you know? Because I remember him being a really great dad when I was younger. But after the whole bisexuality thing and the aromantic thing, I guess my gender was the final nail in the coffin.” I take a deep breath and close my eyes against the tears welling up. Christ, this never gets easier. “I blamed myself for a really long time. My sister took my dad’s side and that really fucked me up, because if someone else I cared about could see that unloveableness in me, it had to be my fault, right?”

“Ed…” Ace murmurs.

“It’s not though,” I reveal. “Other people not liking me, and other people's problems don’t reflect on me. I’m not broken and I’m not the one at fault for being… born weird. It’s not really the same… but Ace I’m not a bad person because my dad sucked. Neither are you.”

The snail sniffs. “Shit, dude. I was *not* emotionally ready for whatever this is when I went to sleep tonight.”

“You can say that again,” I laugh wetly, using my blanket to wipe my face. “Auuuuuugh, we’re just a stew of daddy issues, aren’t we? Even when you think you’re over it, it bites you in the ass.”

Ace makes a gross snorting sound. “Especially with one as nice as mine.”

I let out a wheeze. “You’re such a shit.”

The snail bats its eyes all pretty at me. “But I’m *your* shit.” Then it’s mouth opens wide in what was probably a jaw cracking yawn. “Fuuuck I’m tired. I’m going back to sleep. I… goodnight.”

“Call the Whitebeards’ tomorrow. Do it the day after if you chicken out. Just *do* it,” I remind him.

He sighs. “I’ll… think about it.”

“I love you,” I say firmly, “and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

“Why’d you say it like a threat?” he says weakly.

“Because it was one,” I snark. “You’re fucking stuck with me babes, there’s no escape at this point.”

Ace laughs. “...Fuck. Alright. Goodnight. I… I love you too.”

My heart fills up with warmth and I feel a smile spread uncontrollably across my face. “Goodnight,” I whisper.

Ace gives me a bright smile, then the call disconnects. I pack up my case and take a second to breathe. The night is peaceful and I spare a glance at the constellation Luffy pointed out so many weeks ago. Then I turn around and descend back below decks.

When I reach the women’s room I’m not entirely surprised but a little embarrassed to find a light on, with the hatch to the men’s room open and Zoro’s upper half leaning through, Usopp's head peeking in from above him, and everyone awake and conversing. Nami is sitting in the desk chair and Robin is sat up in her hammock, and Luffy is just rocking back and forth on the bed.

All eyes turn to me as I drop in. I raise a hand in greeting and put my case back on the desk before flopping onto the bed and snuggling into Luffy’s side.

“Sorry for waking you guys up,” I murmur, trying and failing to suppress a yawn.

“Don’t worry about it. Everything ok?” Zoro answers while Luffy’s fingers start to card through my hair.

I shake my head gently so as to not dislodge the hand. “It’s all cool. Bonding over trauma be like that.”

The conversation resumes around me. “Like I was saying, I think another three days will be good for everyone. Sanji said he wanted to go collect some of the long fruit and stuff tomorrow, I think Chopper was going with him and was making some strict rules to watch out for with Robin especially…” Nami’s voice fades out as the rhythmic swipes of Luffy’s fingers guide me to sleep.

_____

My goal for our third day of rest is a simple one; meditation. I figure if I'm gonna start anywhere with learning Haki, that's gonna be it. And after… Yeah it's pretty much become a necessity that I learn this, and learn it as soon as I possibly can.

It, uh — well. Let us never forget I was diagnosed with ADHD for a reason. Suffice to say, it's fucking hard because I'm not lucky enough to be in a mood where I can focus.

"Fuck it, we're brute forcing this," I mutter, stomping up to where Zoro is napping on deck and dropping a basket of long walnuts on him.

He peeks open an eye and glances from the basket to me. "What's this? You bringing me a snack?"

"Nope. I want you to periodically throw these at me while I sit here blindfolded," I announce, sitting down cross-legged a few feet away.

He raises an eyebrow and squints. "...Sure."

"Awesome. Thanks," I cheer, wrapping my scuffed sash around my head and tying it in the back. I take a deep breath and try to focus on… I don't know. Something? The feeling of the world around me? I really don't have a lot of direction for this.

Something wacks hard into my forehead.

"OW!" I screech, bending in half and ripping off my blindfold to glare at Zoro, holding my head. "What the fuck?!"

He tries very hard to smother his grin. "What? You told me to do it!"

"Not that hard you heathen!" I yell, roughly tying my sash back into place, grumbling under my breath and trying to go back to focusing.

A walnut bounces off my shoulder. I take a deep breath. Another one smacks me in the chest. My eyebrow twitches. C'mon, focus focus focus. A walnut bounces off my nose and I scowl in the direction I think Zoro's in. "You did that on purpose!"

"Guilty," he says without remorse.

I huff. "You suck. And space out your throws more! I'm tryna concentrate and you're giving me no time!"

"Why didn't you lead with the instructions if you were gonna be such a bitch about them," he grumbles.

I settle back down. Deep breath in, deep breath out. I try starting out by feeling out and being aware of my own body. I think this is how mediation works? I had a therapist that tried to make me do this but it didn't stick for obvious reasons. A walnut hits my shoulder.

Next is feeling shit around you, yeah? I dunno how to do that. Uh, the deck is hard under my ass. The air is kinda warm. It smells like potatoes. A walnut clips my ear.

"Sorry," Zoro calls, not sounding very sorry.

Alright, maybe thinking about this on a smaller scale. Not trying to connect to the world or whatever, just like… a perimeter around myself. Start with just like an inch or two and work my way up? A walnut hits my back.

"Who the fuck was that?" I grunt, knowing it didn't come from Zoro's direction.

"Sorry. Thought you'd like more help!" Usopp snickers from behind me.

This fucking guy. I continue to focus on my perimeter for a while. I'm pelted from all directions by stupid fucking walnuts, even more so when Nami joins in, the shit. Eventually I've had enough. I tug off the blindfold with a frustrated huff, only to get pelted right between the eyes by a walnut and go sprawling back on the deck.

"Sorry," Zoro snickers.

I glare at the sky for a bit. "This isn't working."

"What are you even trying to do?" Usopp questions, breaking open one of the walnuts.

"Haki," I grumble, sitting back up. There's gotta be an easier way to do this. Observation Haki isn't only limited to sensing attacks, right? It does all kinds of shit. Like strength gauging and emotion reading and stuff. Maybe that'll be easier to start with..? A walnut bounces off the back of my skull. I whip around to where Usopp is snickering and he shuts himself up. "Congrats, Usopp! You just volunteered to have me stare intensely at you for the next hour!"

"What?! Cruel and unusual punishment!" he yelps.

Then I spend an hour staring at him. Intensely. I don't think I sensed any actual emotions but I definitely felt the uncomfortable vibes.

The rest of the day and the day after that are spent the same. Unfortunately fuck all happens so that's a bit of a downer. That is until dinner. We sit down at the table, food is served, and we dig in.

It's — Ok, it's stupid. It's fucking dumb. I've just shoved a forkful of gravy smothered roast beef in my mouth and have shut my eyes due to basically being sent to Nirvana — *fuck* this man can cook a roast — when it happens.

The feeling of absolute heaven on my tongue doesn't distract so much as meld into the sudden ping at the edge of my consciousness, almost like a whisper saying *there.* I stab my fork down into the table at the whispers command and savour my roast as it goes down.

When I open my eyes I'm met with Luffy's puppy dog pout while he tries to pull his hand away from under my fork. I blink at him a couple times. He blinks back at me and wiggles his hand.

"Dude," I mumble, looking back and forth between his hand and my food. "That is so on brand it's painful."

"What? You develop some magical Luffy-sense?" Nami says amusedly.

"Sure developed something. Zoro! Throw something at me!" I demand, shoving more roast beef into my mouth and slapping my hands over my eyes. My shoulders melt just like the meat in my mouth, but once again, that gentle whisper guides my hand up as Nami and Usopp make gaspy shriek noises.

I'm promptly beaned in the face by a salt shaker. I fall backwards off the bench and my knees bang into the table. I lay there for a second just chewing and staring at my hand, poised in front of my face where it went to catch. I feel my forehead start to pulse right behind it.

"Woah."

Nami grabs me by the shoulder and pulls me back onto the bench. "Are you crazy, Zoro?! When Ed says, 'throw something at me!' DON'T LISTEN?!"

"THE ROAST MADE ME MAGIC!" I declare.

Everyone blinks at me. "My roast is good, but not that good," Sanji says slowly.

I shake my head. “Nope. I’m magic now. It came from the roast.”

Chopper’s eyes light up. “Will it make me magic too?!”

I grin at him. “Only one way to find out!”

Chopper nods furiously and shoves all of his roast in his mouth at once.

Nami starts screaming. “CHOPPER YOU’RE GONNA CHOKE—”

———

So funny story. The shitty pseudo Haki I pulled off in the galley? Literally can’t recreate it. So maybe the roast really *was* magical. Whatever. After a couple hours of trying to replicate the results and getting pelted by nuts, we decide to call it quits and retire for the evening.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, the Transponder once again rings at buttfuck o’clock in the morning. I groan long long long into the pillow before dragging myself out of the bed and halfway onto the desk chair. I don’t even bother going above decks this time, I just fucking answer it.

“—ick up pick up pick up — ED!” Ace screams down the mic.

I cringe away from the snail and wipe my hand down my face. “Ace? What the fuck do you want?” I groan. “It’s,” I check the clock and groan louder, “four in the morning!”

“PUT LUFFY ON!” he demands.

I moan, dropping my head onto the desk and sticking my foot over to kick at Luffy, still sprawled on the bed. He makes a tired sound and blinks over at me with sleep crusted eyes.

I jerk my thumb at the snail. “Take this up top, I’m going back to sleep,” I grumble, throwing myself back into the bed and burrowing under the comforter. Luffy gives me a pat, grabbing the Transponders and heading for the ladder.

By the grace of god I manage to drift back off once he’s gone. That is until Luffy fucking *leaps* on me, tearing me directly from a dream about Veggie Tales with a knee to the sternum.

While I wheeze and try to not die, Luffy starts shaking my shoulders and is staring down at me with the widest most manic grin I’ve seen on him yet. His eyes are red and puffy and there’s evidence of tears on his face.

“Wha’s wrong?” I mumble, running one hand through his hair and holding his cheek with the other.

“MY BROTHER IS ALIVE!!!” he yells in my face.

I frown up at him. “I sure fucken hope so he was just on the Transponder… wait—”

“SABO IS ALIVEEEEEEEEEE!”

Chapter End Notes

mic drop

Hey I told you I didn't forget about his ass.

It took a while but there's art for this arc!

Chapter 66: Chapter Sixty Six: Like Theseus's Ship, We'll Fix The Busted Bits

Chapter Summary

Theseus - The Oh Hellos

"—and then he said he called white bread or something and made me promise to tell you because he was sooo mad you made him and do it and promise to accept if someone asked to help him because he was honour bound to say yes to Sabo but I think he was just saying that and is actually just excited to see him again—"

Chapter Notes

I spent six hours straight sitting in once place working on a painting for class and I didn't even fucking notice this final week is killing me.

My Harry Potter phase has come back with a force one might call biblical and I fear for my sanity. December/November are my months to get super depressed and try to regress into an old hyperfixation and when I tell you I had to physically restrain myself from rewatch Fairy Tail for the eighth time I mean it. It will forever and always be my comfort show, first animes just do that to you.

Oh and this is nearly 5k.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"—and then he said he called white bread or something and made me promise to tell you because he was sooo mad you made him and do it and promise to accept if someone asked to help him because he was honour bound to say yes to Sabo but I think he was just saying that and is actually just excited to see him again—"

I slap my hand over Luffy's mouth. "Babydoll, I'm begging, wait until I've finished my tea," I plead.

I think the stewing in his little revelation for a couple hours while I actually got some decent rest made him worse. Not to mention we've finally cast off Long Ring Long Land and are

once again off on our adventure.

“But Ed! You made me wait all morning! I wanna talk *now!”* he whines, crawling up into my lawn chair and squishing me into the side.

I sigh into my cup and down the rest of my tea, slamming it into the saucer and nearly knocking over the stool-like table, and pivot my whole body towards him. “Alright. Go ahead.”

He beams. “OK! So Ace was screaming a lot and apparent my brother, you know the one we thought was dead—”

“Luffy darling, you've never mentioned a second brother before today,” I interject.

He furrows his brow for a second. “Oh. Guess I didn’t. Whatever! So apparently he’s alive but had amnausea and joined the reval — revlon — reprobation army!”

I stare at him incredulously. How do you fuck up revolution but pronounce reprobation perfectly? And *amnausea?* “Uh huh. Seems about right.”

Luffy nods frantically. “So he said he got hit on the head and his memories came back but it shocked him so bad he fell over and hit his head again and was knocked out for a whole week and when he woke up he went to find Ace with those white bread guys but they didn’t know where exactly he was because he never calls and didn’t leave his Snail number — Oh he meant *Whitebeard!* I remember you and Ace telling me about him, why didn’t he just say that?”

I facepalm. “I don’t know Luffy, perhaps he’s an idiot.” Props to Sabo for sticking with not telling anyone about the letter. He’s such a G.

Luffy hums. “Yeah, probably. Anyway so Sabo was just hanging out with Whitebeard or something because they were figuring a way out to contact Ace, but last night Ace called

them because apparently you threatened him into it and Sabo told him everything and demanded Ace wait for him so they could fight that Blackbeard guy together because Ace was being stupid and he had to say yes because you made him promise." He finishes.

I snort into my hand. That fucking loser. Then I double take. "Wait Sabo is gonna go help Ace?"

He nods emphatically. "Yeah, they were gonna set up a Rhonda-vous or something somewhere or other then keep going together." My shoulders relax. Oh my god, so many of my gambles just paid off. I… am a genius. "Wait! I did mention Sabo before! When I told you about the monkey and prince at the Baratie!" he exclaims. I tilt my head. Oh. Huh, figures he was talking about Sabo.

"Ed darling! I made you pommes paille!" Sanji sings, whirling up to my lawn chair with two dishes in hand, one he hands to me and one he hands to Nami. Oh my god his shirt says Gentlecook that's the cutest thing ever.

My eyes light up and I shove Luffy out of the chair, making grabby hands at the dish. I keep Luffy's evil arms away from the food with my foot as I taste a forkful. God I love potatoes.

Something bounces off the back of my head and I turn around with a scowl. "Who's the wise guy?!"

Usopp sticks his tongue out at me. "What? I thought you were doing some dumb training thing? I'm helping!"

"Who asked you to, you shit!" I squawk. Nami, sitting in a lawn chair adjacent to mine, bursts out laughing.

"I want food too!" Luffy whines, still reaching for my food as I stand up on my chair to escape him.

“Not only did you keep trying to break into the kitchen this morning, you also dragged me away from my laundry and now my suit jacket has shrunk! So you’ll fucking wait and you’ll fucking like it,” Sanji threatens. “I told you I had stuff cooking, you’ll survive until the rest is done.”

“Your suit jacket shrunk? Can I have it?” I ask around another mouthful of paille.

Sanji swoons. “Oh of course my dear! It’s not like I can really wear it anymore.”

I cheer and jab the toe of my shoe into Luffy's cheek when he gets too close again.

“But Saaaanjiiiii…” Luffy keeps bitching and moaning while the door on the opposite deck swings open and Robin comes strolling out.

“Robin! How do you feel? Are you cold?” Chopper questions from below us.

She flashes a bright though not entirely genuine smile. “Thanks to you I feel much better. Thank you, Doctor.”

Chopper starts twirling around in a mad fit of giggles while Nami calls over to her. “Don’t overdo it, Robin. Take your time and rest if you have to. We don’t expect you to spring back as fast as these monsters,” she says, jerking her thumb at where I’m jumping to get away from Luffy and nearly fall off the chair.

“Robin, should I make you something to warm you up? How’s your appetite?” Sanji croons, draping himself over the rail like a scene out of a Shakespeare play.

“Some coffee would be nice,” she chuckles.

“Whatever you want!” he cries, sprinting for the galley door with the ladies following. I duck under another of Luffy’s grabby hands and sprint after them to escape him.

I’m finishing the last of my drink while Nami is chatting about something or other, I really haven’t been paying attention and if she learns that I’ll never sleep soundly again, when the ship suddenly turns. Robin’s limbs stop my head from banging into the deck as I fall backwards off the bench, catching Sanji and the drinks as well.

“What are those idiots doing?!” Nami shrieks, jumping up and running out the door to the rails. “Hey! Who said you could turn the ship around?!” she yells down at them.

“Nami! There’s a giant frog covered in scars down there! We’re gonna barbecue it!” Luffy yells back.

“You’re gonna *eat it?!”* Zoro and Chopper scream.

I trot halfway to the rail before Nami is on me, swiping my spyglass and flicking it open to look forward. “Hey! I just found out that’s basically a family heirloom!” I squawk.

“We’re headed for a lighthouse! Why is there one out here..?” Nami mutters, paying me no attention.

“Which way is the frog going?!” Luffy demands.

I snatch my spyglass back and scowl at Nami’s unapologetic face. I take my own look over to the lighthouse. I squint at a familiar X shape crossing signal and suddenly a ringing bell sounds. My eyes widen. “Woah! Slow down the ship! This is a railway crossing!” I shout down at the boys, who still haven't stopped rowing.

“Railway crossing? Ed, we’re in the middle of the ocean,” Nami says confusedly.

“The sea train runs through here! Do you not fucking see that thing?! It's massive and about to hit us!” I squawk, pointing aggressively at where the Puffing Tom is absolutely blazing

towards us. And wow is it a trip and a half watching a train go on water, let me tell you.

Nami's jaw drops. "OH MY GOD IT'S GONNA HIT US! STOP STOP OH MY GOD STOP!"

"The frog stopped, let's get it!" Luffy cheers.

Nami screeches. "WHAT PART OF STOP SOUNDED *OPTIONAL—"* The ship grinds across something, probably the tracks, and Nami's screaming gets an octave higher. "WE'RE GONNA DIE WE'RE GONNA DIE—"

The ship shunts forward and the train just misses us.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" half of everyone screams.

"Wha — Frog! Get away from there!" Luffy yells at the frog, who's name I can't remember for the life of me (Yokozuna? Maybe??), who's stopped dead set at the nose of the train. "What are you doing?!"

The frog all but screams at the train, then it slams into him and sends him flying.

"OH MY GOD IT RAN HIM OVER!" Luffy and Usopp yell.

The Puffing Tom chugs past us with a loud toot of the steam whistle, leaving a churning wake and steam clouds behind as it goes. We all stare after it open mouthed for a long second.

"I really wanna ride that thing," I blurt. I get incredulous looks from everyone except Luffy, who nods in agreement.

“Oh! Look granny, pirates!” a young girl's voice calls from the lighthouse train station.

“What? You’re sure, Chimney? All right, hold on a minute,” an older woman's voice responds.

“Ah fuck. There were people inside. They’re probably calling for reinforcements,” Zoro grunts.

I laugh and shake my head. “Don’t worry about that.”

“Oh hello! Umm… What was I gonna say again? I forgot…” Kokoro slurs into a Transponder microphone, dropping down onto her knees. She’s a goofy looking woman, a big pink coat half buried under her huge scraggly head of bright yellow hair and a permanent smile on her painted lips.

“Is she drunk?!” Zoro and Usopp squawk.

I laugh again. I fucking love these two.

_____

“Paille? Sounds like it’ll go well with my drink,” Kokoro laughs, taking the offered dish and handing it to Chimney and the… cat rabbit thing… Gonbei. “I hope you guys aren’t train robbers! Ngagaga!”

“I’m Luffy! Future King of the Pirates!” my ding dong of a Captain announces.

“Really?!” Chimney awes.

Kokoro continues laughing. “You’re an interesting chap!”

“When’s the sea train coming again? I wanna ride it so bad, oh my god can we make time to ride it please? I love trains. It’s a steam engine right? Would you let me blow the whistle?” I ramble, shaking Nami by the shoulders.

“Ngagaga! I appreciate your enthusiasm, kiddo!” Kokoro cackles, guzzling down some of what I think is wine.

“How the actual hell is there a train running on water?” Nami questions incredulously.

“Your friend is right! It’s a steam engine that rotates paddles over the tracks!” Chimney explains, crunching on the paille. “The tracks are just below the water, they’re partitioned off. It was kinda stupid of you to sail over them. But the train circles around the same places every day, taking people from island to island. Mail and boats too!”

“The frog wouldn’t know that. Mean of you to blast him away, we were gonna cook him!” Luffy bemoans.

Chimney frowns. “That was Yokozuna. He causes a lot of trouble around here, he keeps trying to defeat the sea train and test his strength against it.That wasn’t enough to finish him, he’ll be back.” Ah, I was right about the name.

Luffy gasps. “A test of strength?! That’s why he didn’t run away, he’s pretty gutsy!”

“Gutsy, sure. But it’s a huge pain for us! He keeps breaking the guard rail! And the customers get worried when they see him!” Chimney complains.

“That’s so cool! I’m not gonna eat him, then. I couldn’t eat something with so much determination!” Luffy proclaims.

Nami gives him an exasperated look. *"That's* what made you change your mind? It's a *frog."*

"A very determined frog," I nod sagely. Nami smacks me on the shoulder.

"So where are you all headed to? If your friend wants to take the train you could go to St. Poplar, the town of the Spring Queen, or Pucci, the gourmet city. Or maybe the carnival town of San Faldo. If you're with the government, there's another special train you could take," Kokoro explains.

I'm practically vibrating in excitement. "All of them. Let's go to all of them, round trip. Sightseeing journey. Please oh please," I beg, tugging on Luffy's arms. "I haven't been on a real train in forever, *c'mon."*

"I wanna go to the gourmet city!" Luffy cheers, tugging my arms back.

Nami slaps both of us upside the head. "We already have a ship, we don't need to take the train! And we should just follow the Log!"

"But Naaaamiiiii!" me and Luffy whine together.

"Gourmet city," Luffy emphasizes.

"Have you ever ridden a train while high off your ass? Baby, it'll change your whole life," I promise.

"So what's your course?" Kokoro inquires.

"East from here," Nami responds, ignoring us.

Kokoro ah's. "You'll be headed to Water 7 then. The train just came from there, Blue Station. It's a beautiful place, they call it the city of water. They're known for their shipbuilding — when it comes to boats they're first class! Ships are built there under commission by no less than the World Government!" she boasts.

Luffy gasps. "They must have some great carpenters then!"

"Ngagaga! Not just great, the best in the world! All gathered up in one place!" Kokoro corrects.

Usopp and Luffy point at each other with stars in their uses, cheering each other's names. "It's decided! We're going there and getting a carpenter! The best damn one they have!" Luffy declares.

"That so? In that case hold on a sec," Kokoro slurs, rocking up and out of her chair and retreating back into the station.

Chimney crunches on some more paille and squints over at our ship with a critical eye. "Your boat's pretty beat up. Good thing you're headed where you're headed."

I nod. "We know. But we'll fix her up, she deserves it."

She'll make it further yet, if I have anything to say about it.

Chimney gives me a wide smile and Kokoro ambles back out of the station with a couple papers in hand. "Take these! It's a simple map of the city and a letter of introduction. Have them fix up your ship niceley. Water Seven is a huge city, so don't get lost!"

I take the offered papers and pause for a second. "Hey, granny Kokoro. Could we get a second one of these?" I ask, waving the letter.

She raises her eyebrows at me. “Another one? What for?”

“Well… I know a bit about the shipwrights of Water Seven. We might be interested in the skill set of someone… not employed under Galley-La. Someone not as… ah, sympathetic with the government, if you know what I mean,” I explain. Dude I never about how hard it was to describe Franky on the down low. Wait. “Like a mob boss or some shit. You know any?”

Kokoro blinks at me a couple times, then bursts out laughing. “Yeah! I might know a guy!” She plucks another envelope from her jacket, opens it and scribbles something hastily inside, then seals it shut and scrawls a name across it before handing it over. “You oughta know you’ll have a hell of a time convincing him to do anything less than dismantling the poor girl, though.”

I smile down at Franky’s name. “Don’t worry about that. I’m almost as persuasive as my Captain.” I flip open the shitty shitty map she drew, flash it to her, and give her a smirk. “And you oughta know this map is terrible. But I appreciate it nonetheless.”

She throws her head back again and cackles as I retreat back up onto the ship, my crew already all on board. “We’ll be heading back to Water Seven ourselves soon. If we see ya, I’ll buy you a drink! Ngagaga! The Log Pose will take a week to set on Water Seven, so enjoy some downtime!”

“We’re off! Thank you for the information!” Nami calls down with a wave.

“Prepare to sail!” Luffy cheers, jumping down off the bannister.

“Hey, you might wanna consider putting a guardrail that lowers when the train passes, so any ships that don’t see the partitions don’t get hit!” I suggest as we start to pull out.

“Ngagaga, I’ll think about it!” Kokoro laughs, her Chimney and Gonbe waving at us with big smiles. “Watch out for the government people!”

———

“Guys I’m gonna go make a call before we get there, I’ll be back in a bit,” I say as I head for the inside of the ship.

“Oooh are you calling Ace again?” Luffy asks excitedly, bouncing after me.

I laugh and muss his hat around. “Not this time, no. I’ll get you when I do, though. Please ignore any screaming, I’m gonna go lie a bunch for fun.”

He gives me a bright smile as I disappear down into the ship.

I dial a familiar number up on my Transponder and wait for it to patch me through to Jonah. The second he’s picked up I’m right against the mic. “Jonah are there other people in the room?” I rush out.

The snail blinks. “Uh, yeah? Is this something that needs privacy—”

I cut him off. “JONAH SWEETHEART I HAVE BIG NEWS! THE TEST WAS POSITIVE, YOU’RE GOING TO BE A FATHER!” I cry down the mic as loud as I can. “IS THIS ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU LEAVE YOUR GIRLFRIEND YET?!”

Sometimes it’s nice to just have fun.

The snail's face blows dark red as its jaw drops and eyes bug out. “EXCUSE ME?!”

There’s a roar of laughter from the other side and I fight with everything in me not to follow their lead.

“You know I don’t mind being your side piece, but you have to know this changes things!” I wheeze, losing the fight by a large margin.

“You son of a bitch! I give you my number out of the goodness of my heart and *this* is how you treat me?!” Jonah yells at me.

“Jonah buddy, I didn’t know you were such a player!” someone hoots.

“Dude, did you bang your *CP agent?!”* a voice I recognize from the last time I called screeches.

That does it. I burst into uncontrollable cackles until something catches in my throat like karma and sends me hunching over hacking up my lungs.

“You deserve this! I hope you choke to death!” Jonah spits while the laughter fades out in the background. There’s the resolute sound of a door closing, then total silence. “You’re a piece of shit, you know that? You’re the actual worst.”

“Yeah but I’m funny and pretty so I get away with a lot. Are you pissed enough that you wouldn’t do me a solid?” I ask, batting my eyes.

“I’m starting to seriously regret ever giving you directions. I should sic an Admiral on your ass,” he complains. “What do you want?”

“So it’s totally chill if this is something you can’t actually do,” I start. “I’m looking for records and pictures of the current members of CP9. If you happen to have any.”

The snail blinks deeply exhausted eyes at me for a second. “We don’t have records of our secret assassination squad. Certainly not with pictures, and certainly not in fucking Loguetown,” he deadpans.

I shrug. “Worth a shot. To be honestly I mostly only called to fuck with you.”

Jonah heaves a heavy sigh of disappointment. “How soon do you need them? Because if you give me a couple weeks I might be able to scrounge them up.”

I shake my head. “Nah, I’ll need them within the next couple of days, maybe even hours depending on how this goes from here. Wait, you just said there weren’t any records, how would you even get them?”

The President whistles a breath through his teeth. “There’s rumours about a ton of us intel agents being reassigned to Marineford, my division most prominently. I’ll have access to a lot more shit if the transfer to the main base goes through,” he explains. “Also how the actual fuck do you know about CP9?”

“How do *you* know about CP9?” I counter.

The snail’s expression somehow gets flatter. “It’s my *job.”*

“Right,” I say, glancing off to the side, “so guess you can’t help me.” I frown. “Do you know why you’re getting reassigned?”

It’s… a little suspicious, considering Blackbeard is supposed to catch Ace near the end of this arc. Not that he’s fucking gonna.

“No clue, because none of us have gotten official transfer papers and it’s all just rumour, there hasn’t been a reason given. If I had to hazard a guess I’d say it’s your wack ass new generation that’s making the higher ups antsy, but it’s not like I have proof,” Jonah sighs.

There’s the sound of a door being knocked on. “Jonah! If you have time to dirty talk your mistress you have time to call Straussberger in Division 4 about the Conrad numbers! I don’t care that you’re up for Master Chief Petty Officer or that we might be transferring, get it done you lazy nerd!” the guy from earlier yells, muffled through the door.

“I’ll write you up, Fergus! Don’t think I won’t!” Jonah yells back. “Sorry Ed, I gotta get going. Sorry I couldn’t help.”

I wave my hand. “Don’t worry about it. Good luck with your transfer and… promotion?”

Jonah rolls his eyes. “Yeah, thanks. Talk to you later.” Then he hangs up.

That’s too bad, but not totally unexpected. I’m still a little suspicious about the transfer timing, but it’s not like I could really do anything about it. I don’t know how far out we are from Water 7, so I pluck out the letter Kokoro wrote for Iceburg and open it carefully. The damn thing literally just says *take care of their ship for them* with a kiss mark, that lady is a few wrenches short of the toolbox.

I put the note back inside the envelope and pull out a piece of my own paper, then scrawl out a short message. The names of all the CP9 agents currently in the city, and their plan to assassinate him and pin it on Robin, as well as telling him not to reach out to Franky, don’t want his ass getting in trouble. I fold the note up, and write another message on the front.

Read when you’re alone. Not even your secretary. Yours and Cutty Flam’s lives depend on this.

Here’s to hoping that’ll be enough for him to, if not believe me, not tear the note to shreds before reading it. I tuck my note inside the envelope behind Kokoro’s, seal it back up, and make my way up to the deck.

When I emerge, the first that I see is Luffy’s horrifying drawing as it’s mercilessly shoved in my face. “Ed! I want this guy as our carpenter!” he proclaims.

I pull the drawing back and nearly burst out laughing. In a vague, sort of horrifying way, it really does look like Franky. “Aye, Captain. I’ll go find him for you,” I chuckle. “We should hang this up on the memento wall.”

“Here’s your allowance for the week, Ed,” Nami says, dropping a small pouch into my hand. When the hell did she change? I was literally in the girls room?? Whatever, it’s a cute fit.

“Thank you darlin’. What the hell are you doing, Usopp?” I question, eyebrow raised at where he’s just sorta hugging onto the mast.

“This patchwork holds the memories of all of our adventures with the Merry. The thought that she’s gonna get fixed up all nice and pretty has got me all emotional,” he says wistfully, patting the metal plates.

“The Merry has been through a lot, especially since we’ve come to the Grand Line. The creaks and leaks are getting pretty bad, if we ignore them it’ll put both us and the ship in danger,” Sanji adds. When did *he* change back into formalwear?

I frown at the deck for a second. *Fuck,* this is such a terrible place to be. We can’t go forward with the Going Merry, the New World would tear her to shreds, but…

“We have lots of money now, we can make her good as new!” Luffy says cheerfully.

“Better than new!” Usopp corrects.

Goddamnit this place is our home. And losing her would crush Usopp, I can’t have that. There’s no guarantee whatever small amount of confidence I’ve been trying to instil in Usopp would be near enough to stop him from losing it.

“Hey is that it?” Zoro suddenly calls from the bow.

We all turn forward. In the distance is the strange silhouette of Water 7, the tiered fountain shape a beacon on the horizon.

“Island! We can see the island!” Luffy cheers. “Alright, time to row!”

“The wind’s enough, idiot. Don’t waste our energy,” Sanji groans.

“You guys have a way of making me feel underdressed. I’ll be back,” I mutter, going back inside the ship.

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“Ed, I think you killed Sanji,” Nami tells me, gently kicking Snaji’s twitching body out of the pool of blood that spewed out of his nose.

“Dude, you can’t even see my tits in this. You have seen me half naked. Calm down,” I groan, rolling up the sleeves of the suit jacket Sanji has accidentally shrunk in the wash. For god's sake, I’m even actually wearing a bra under it. The damn thing is being kept shut not only by the buttons, but my gun belt too!

“I can’t get over how crazy this place looks,” Usopp mutters as we pull up closer to Blue Station. It really does, it’s fucking incredible watching the fountain at the stop of the city pump water through the canals and out the gates.

“Hey!” a fisherman yells from his boat. “Pirates get in trouble if they enter from the front, steer around that way and enter town from the side!”

We all blink at him for a second. “Ok, you got it! Thanks!” I respond as we start to turn. We sail around the corner into the city proper, and it’s like being shoved directly into a painting of Venice.

“Are the houses sinking?” Chopper asks.

“No, look down there. The buildings were built with a submerged foundation in mind,” Robin points out.

“I guess this is why it’s called the city of water,” Sanji muses.

“I always wanted to go somewhere like Amsterdam,” I murmur, peering down side streets.

“Hey, you there! You can’t come this way!” a guy on the terrace of a restaurant calls over. “What’s a pirate ship doing here? You here to loot?”

“Nah, we wanna get our ship repaired!” Luffy answers form the figurehead.

The guy's face lights up. “Oh! Then there’s a cape up that way you can drop anchor at!” he suggests.

“Thanks!” Luffy yells over as we move to follow instructions.

As we pull up beside the cape Nami calls for the sail to be furled. Zoro goes to do just that and the mast fucking snaps.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!” Usopp screams, running to try and push it back up.

“ALL I DID WAS PULL ON THE ROPE!” Zoro screams back, helping. “That was scary… I didn’t realize the ship was in such bad condition,” he wheezes.

“Why aren’t the people here scared of pirates?” Nami asks, looking off toward where we came from.

“Pirates are customers too,” Zoro grunts as Usopp smacks him repeatedly while he holds the mast up.

“Or they have really good bodyguards,” Robin suggests.

“It’s both actually,” I chirp, then clap. “Alright guys, I’m splitting us up into groups so we can get this shit done with the least amount of collateral damage as possible.” I hand the letter for Iceburg to Nami. “You, Usopp, and Luffy go take a portion of the treasure to exchange for gold, then go to Galley-La and find Iceburg about the ship. He’s the mayor, shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

Nami nods and pockets the letter. “And you and the rest?”

I wave the second letter, the one for Franky, and smirk. “Robin, Sanji, Chopper and I will go get a second opinion. Zoro, you are on watch duty until we get back. Once most of our business is done I’ll take you shopping for books, how’s that sound Chops?”

Chopper gives me a bright smile. “Yeah!”

Nami counts off her fingers for a second. “I think we’ll just take the actual treasure to exchange, you never know when we’ll hit a commerce hub city again. And gold can be exchanged virtually anywhere if they have the funds,” she mutters to herself. “If we need more berri for the ship we can always go back.”

“Who exactly are we going to see?” Sanji inquires.

“A mob boss,” I say matter of factly.

The crew collectively sweat drops. I consider warning Usopp about the Franky Family stealing the money, but we’ll be there to grab it when they bring it to Franky himself anyways so I decide against it. They just snatch it up when he’s not looking, right..?

“Oh, but once you get the gold exchanged, put our names or symbol on the case, makes it easier to keep track of,” I suggest.

Nami shrugs and gives me a thumbs up. “If you think that’s a good idea.”

I give her a nod, then smirk back at Robin, Sanji and Chopper. “Alright party people, let’s rock n’ roll.”

Chapter End Notes

My greatest hardship is that this fic is my hyperfixation so all the music I listen to I want to connect back to it but I'm out here listening to love songs and getting into a very immature fist fight with myself about making Ed and Luffy platonically marry so I can imagine them to songs about marriage. I cannot believe I have created this position for myself.

Fun fact Ed and Luffy get legally married by accident in that college AU of this fic I mentioned forever ago and never posted anything about. Zoro accidentally helps and officiates. He got legally ordained on a dare. It's legally binding they submitted the paperwork and everything.

ART OF MY GORGEOUS CHILD

Chapter 67: Chapter Sixty Seven: Tall And Tan And Young And Lovely

Chapter Summary

Girl From Ipanema - Frank Sinatra

I lean forward and hook my chin over Robin's shoulder to squint off another side road before my eyes widen. "Oh! That's it over there!" I exclaim, pointing to the distant figure of the horrendous looking Franky House.

Chapter Notes

Back at it again with the Frank Sinatra because I'm predictable like that.

This chapter goes so many places y'all. So very many places. But! But! Franky time! I love him! He is so very cool!

Bouta go spend the next few hours with my relatives wish me luck. I'm gonna dazzle and distract them with my impressive grades to make them forget how bad I am at getting my life together. The high 80s and and two 90s will save me from questions I just know it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you know where you're going?" Robin asks.

I shrug. "Kinda. I know it's on the outskirts."

"That's a little non-specific," Sanji points out.

After acquiring a pair of Yagura bulls and basically choosing a random direction to sail in, we may or may not be lost in the back streets. "Call me crazy, but I think we passed that crepe shop already," I say slowly.

“Is this what mosshead feels like?” Sanji mutters from the other bull.

Robin chuckles and turns the bull me and her are riding away from another Yagura. “I guess some traits truly are contagious.”

“Woah! Look how cool that person looks!” Chopper gasps from behind Sanji, pointing at one of those masked performers walking along beside the canal.

“These masks really are neat,” I murmur as they disappear around a corner. Neat and staying as far away as possible from Robin. I’m not letting her bitchass out of my sight today.

“I believe there’s a carnival happening in San Faldo, one of the other cities on the train line. I overheard someone talking about it,” Robin mentions.

“They’re masks? Though they just looked like that,” Chopper admits. We all chuckle.

I lean forward and hook my chin over Robin’s shoulder to squint off another side road before my eyes widen. “Oh! That’s it over there!” I exclaim, pointing to the distant figure of the horrendous looking Franky House.

Robin steers us down the street toward our destination. “Lucky break,” Sanji says, following after. “So you said this guy was a mob boss, how is he gonna help us fix the ship? Is he a craftsman on the side?”

“Oh no, right now he’s a ship dismantler,” I answer honestly.

Sanji chokes and Robin lets out a shocked giggle. “Oh my,” she snickers.

“Isn’t that the exact opposite of what we want to do?!” Chopper shrieks.

“Why are we going to a *ship dismantler* about getting our ship fixed?” Sanji asks desperately as the Yaguras’ get as close to the cape the Franky House sits on as they can before we have to continue on foot.

I trip getting out of the saddle/boat thing and Robin catches me by the arm to pull me up onto the rocky ground. “Gotta know how something comes apart to put it back together,” I chirp. “Besides, relevant work experience and connections to get top class materials, what’s not to like!”

“So you know this man?” Robin asks.

I shake my head as we approach the door. There’s loud sounds of roughhousing and partying from the other side and I bang my fist on it. “Nope.” Chopper squeaks and pops into his big human(ish) form.

The noise lowers for a moment as the door creaks open. One of the square girls, the curly one, Kiwi I think? sticks her head out at me and blinks. “Hello? Can I help you?”

Sanji swoons. “You didn’t tell me there was ladies involved!”

I jab him with my elbow. “Hi. We’re here for a meeting with Franky,” I say with a bright sunny smile.

Kiwi blinks. “Oh? I didn’t know he had one scheduled.”

I laugh. “Oh you know Franky, he’d leave his own nose behind if it wasn’t bolted to his face!”

She cracks a smile at that, opening the door further. “You’re right about that! Please come in. He’s at the back, I'll take you over.”

The inside of the Franky House is just as terribly decorated as the outside. It smells vaguely of cheap beer and cola, and the chequered floors have a tackiness that feels like it. The whole place has the atmosphere of a dive bar, or an underground jazz room.

Kiwi leads us through a throng of people, most of them dressed in that stupid fishnet-leather-overalls getup and a few of them eye us weirdly before going back to their drinking and partying. She takes us back into a more secluded alcove like thing with two leather couches separated by a table, one populated by the other square haired girl, and Franky.

At least I think it's Franky. He's in a ridiculous mask and cape situation and is chilling with a cola in one meaty hand.

I drop down onto the free couch, manspreading to assert dominance of course, and throw my hands over the back. Robin delicately takes a seat on my left, crossing her legs and leaning on one hand while Sanji seats himself on my right with his arms crossed and blows a cloud of smoke out. Chopper files in behind the couch with his arms crossed, looking sufficiently intimidating.

"Afternoon," I greet.

We stare at each other for a long moment. "Who are you assholes?" he blurts. Yeah it's Franky.

"We're your — Robin, what time is it?" I mumble out the side of my mouth.

"1:30," she answers.

"We're your 1:30!" I say cheerfully.

"I don't have a 1:30," Frankey says confusedly.

“You don’t?” Kiwi repeats, sitting beside him and sounding just as confused.

“You do now!” I cheer. Then I spy an unopened bottle of cola on the table and swipe it, cracking it open and taking a crisp sip. I nearly groan, god I’ve missed this stuff. “That’s the shit. Alright, you ready to talk business?”

“What? No! I don’t know you!” Franky squawks, taking his mask off and raising an eyebrow at us. The cape follows, being thrown over the back of the couch. I kinda stare at him for a moment, taking in how strange his face is. That chin is something to behold.

“We’re the Strawhat Pirates. We’re here to make an agreement,” Robin says diplomatically, noting my silence.

Franky blinks at her a couple times. “Strawhats? Oh I’ve heard of you jokers. You’re E. D. Domino, that detective kid. I have no idea who this asshole is,” he gestures to Sanji who blows more smoke directly at him, “I don’t know *what* that guy is,” he gestures to Chopper, “and you’re…”

He trails off while he looks at Robin. She tenses ever so slightly at my side. “Our archeologist. I know she’s pretty, but you should know staring is rude,” I answer for him. I knew he was gonna be weird about her, but goddamn. He’s just gonna have to get over it, because she’s not leaving my sight.

“No. You’re Nico Robin,” he says slowly, mouth pinched.

“Yes, and isn’t she lovely. Now can we get back to what we were talking about?” I say flatly.

His eyes snap back to me. “Yeah. What the hell do you jokers want from me?”

“Our ship is in desperate need of repairs. Another portion of our crew is at Galley-La right now getting their help, but I always like a second opinion. Besides,” I toss the paper from Kokoro at him, “we have a referral.”

Franky scans over the note and scowls. “Damnit, granny Kokoro. That woman never knows when to keep to herself. Fine, what do you want? You said you’re already getting Galley-La, and I’m in the business of *breaking* ships, not fixing them.”

I grimace. “Yeah… Our ship’s preeeetty fucked. She’ll need some *serious* oomph.”

His face twists in trepidation. “...How serious an oomph are we talkin’? What’s her damage?”

I exchange looks with my friends. “You ever seen a ship put through an industrial strength cheese grater?” I say slowly. Are the stars on his arms tattoos or like, modifications? I’d never really thought about it but looking up close it’s hard to tell.

Franky’s face falls. “Yeah… that sounds pretty bad. Do you know the… extent of the damages?”

I stare at my shoes for a second. “Bad.” Then I look up. “We can spare no expense for materials and such. In fact, I hear rumours about a certain type of wood available on the black market in St. Poplar that might interest us both.” I lean forward and stare right into his sunglasses-covered eyes. “We need a ship of dreams that’ll be able to take us to the end of the Grand Line. Think you can help us?”

I see his eyes widen ever so slightly. “Ah, is that the case?” he says quietly. “You wanna get to the end of the Grand Line, eh? Find the One Piece? You wanna be King of the Pirates, kid?”

I scoff out a laugh. “Oh please, me? Pirate King? Nah. That’s for my Captain, we’re just along for the ride.” I go back to just looking at him.

“Kid, you got a staring problem? I got something on my face?” Franky asks, patting around his bright buttfucking blue sideburns.

I blink. “Oh! No, sorry it’s just… You’re a cyborg, right?”

He eyes me over the top of his Gurren Lagann ass glasses. “I am. Whatsit to ya?”

I glance down at my shoes before back up at him. “It’s just you literally built yourself from the ground up. I really admire that,” I admit, semi-shyly. I mean, I’m not even super into cyborgs and shit like that, but Franky is just *so damn cool.*

Franky stares at me for a long second before tears absolutely burst out from under his glasses. “What the shit?” Sanji curses, leaning back.

“Ah shit I’m sorry was that too outta pocket?” I ask frantically, waving my hands and looking back and forth between everyone on the couches. Kiwi and… Mozu are just rolling their eyes like this is a daily occurrence, and Robin is failing to hide a smile behind her hand.

“That was *super* nice, little bro! I’ll do anything I can to help you out!” Franky wails, trying to wipe his face up with a handkerchief Mozu hands him.

I blink a couple times. “Oh. Great.” Score I guess? Fawn for the win once again. And people wonder why I do it, man if it works it works. “Er — but there’s something you oughta know…” I trail off.

He finishes wiping his face and raises an eyebrow. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“We… might need a whole new ship,” I say quietly. Both Sanji and Robin’s heads snap to me.

“Ed!” Chopper gasps.

“What?!” Sanji blurts.

“Detective,” Robin murmurs, brow furrowed.

“Something’s wrong with the Merry I don’t think can be fixed,” I admit softly.

Franky gives me a long sorry look. “The keel.” I nod silently. “Well… not much you can do to fix that, if anything. You said the Galley-La guys were on that, if it can be fixed, they’ll do it. If it can’t… at the very least I’ll draw you up some plans. You mentioned Adams Wood? I can go get you some,” he offers.

We all blink at him once, twice. “You’d do that?” Sanji says doubtfully.

“Not at the expense of my own dime, of course. You’ll still need to pay for it, but yeah. I can do that. Especially for a little bro as super as you,” Franky says with a wide smile. “I’ve been looking for an opportunity to get some for three odd years, this was just the excuse I was looking for!”

I raise the bottle of cola I swiped at him. “Franky, you are a G. And no worries about the money, one of your guys should be arriving with it any minute.”

Right on that cue, the front doors burst open and there’s a flurry of cheering as a group of people enter. The main guy, who I recognize as the asshole who stole from Usopp, saunters right up to the table and throws down our cases of money with a bright grin flashed at Franky. “Check it out boss! 200 million berri!”

“Is that payment enough?” I ask.

“What?” Franky asks, confused.

“Hey! This is my money, it’s not for you!” the guy, Zambai I think his name is, squawks.

My eyes flick back and forth between the cases and him for a moment before I flip them over. There, scratched into the surface and clear as day, is the Jolly Roger of the Strawhat Pirates. Fuck, I love when people listen to me. “Yeah, no. It’s ours. Like he said, 200 million berri. Is that payment enough? Truly, your man is such a dear to bring it here for us,” I say with a sickly sweet smile.

It’s quiet for a long moment before Franky bursts out laughing. “Damn, little bro, you’re good! Did you know he was gonna steal your shit? You timed that so well!”

I flip my hair. “It’s all natural talent. Besides, I know your gang are part time bounty hunters, as soon as we pulled into the city your boys probably had their sights on us.” I turn to Zambai, who still looks dumbfounded, with a sharp smirk. “You probably tried to rob our ship, didn’t you?”

His dropped jaw snaps shut and he looks to the side. “And you had the swordsman stay behind,” Robin chuckles. “Well played, Detective Domino.”

I spread my arms and do as dramatic a bow as I can without getting up. “Thank you, thank you. I do it all for my hero and idol, Detective Dick Gumshoe.”

Sanji catches one of my hands and presses a kiss to it. “Impressive as always, dearest.”

Franky barks out another laugh. “Aw Zambai bro, lose the long face, you lost this one fair and square. Have a seat! We closed a deal and it’s time to celebrate!” He knocks on the two cases with his free hand as he holds up his cola. “This’ll get us that Adams Wood no problem, you can count on me! Yeow!”

Was that a Micheal Jackson noise?

I clink my cola bottle against his. “Franky,” I say quietly. “The Merry is really fucking important to us. If… if there’s any shot in hell you can do something to save her… would you?” I beg.

He gives me a resolute nod. “I’ll do what I can, little bro.” I give him a big, slightly damp, smile. However slim a chance… It’s still a chance. “This deserves a party! You guys party? I’ll leave to get your stuff after a party.”

I throw my head back and laugh. The joy is cut short by the front doors of the Franky House blowing right off their hinges.

“Holy shit!” I curse, nearly dropping my bottle.

“Hey you!” Usopp’s voice screams through the smoke, sounding rough and shaky. “Give us our money back!”

He steps into the building proper and my heart drops into my feet. He’s got his bloodied shaking arms raised with his slingshot. The rest of him is plastered in scratches, blood and scuffs, and his chest is heaving with the simple effort of keeping himself on his feet.

The bottle falls from my hands and I rise to my feet like I can’t help myself.

“Hey, it’s the guy we stole the money from! He’s with Strawhat Luffy, we thought they were supposed to be strong, but…” some guy near the front of the building, he came in with Zambai but didn’t come back with him, sneers. “I’ve never seen such a weakling!”

“Usopp!” Chopper yells, running toward him.

Usopp’s arm drops in surprise as he takes in us and our setup. “What…” he breathes out, eyes darting to each of us and the cases on the table. “What the hell are you doing?!” he yells. “These guys stole the money to fix the Going Merry! Why the *actual fuck* are you drinking with them?!”

Chopper finally makes his way over and takes gentle hold of one of Usopp's arms to assess the damage. “Why are you hurt so bad?! You shouldn’t be moving, let alone picking a fight like this!” he cries.

Usopp wretches his arm away and takes a step back. “Is this that guy you were talking about? The mob boss? Did you know he was gonna steal our money?” he demands, voice accusing.

Not telling him about it suddenly feels like a betrayal I hadn’t seen the consequences of. I forgot just how badly they *hurt* him. I forgot they hurt him here at *all.* If I still had the bottle in my hands I’d drop it all over again.

A hand lands on my shoulder and I all but jump out of my skin. “Usopp,” Sanji reprimands, and if it couldn’t get any worse, “Ed couldn’t have known they were gonna beat you up for our money, you can’t blame them for that.”

“The Detective did say they knew the Franky Family had eyes on us as soon as we arrived,” Robin adds quietly.

Indignant anger takes over Usopp’s face. “What?! And you didn’t think to warn us, *detective?”* he sneers, hurling my title like a curse. “Or did you trip and somehow let that little tidbit drop out of your head?” His knees are shaking so hard I fear he may collapse.

“Usopp! Watch it!” Sanji snaps. “Maybe Ed just assumed you’d be able to fend them off!”

Usopp flinches back. I roughly shrug Sanji’s hand off. “That’s not fair. I’ll take responsibility for not warning you,” I choke out. “It all worked out though, didn’t it? I made us our deal, so let’s move on. Unless you want to take out your grudge, which you can do separately from our transaction.”

One of Usopp’s knees give out and I jolt forward. Chopper catches him before he can crash to the ground. “We have to get you back to the Merry so I can patch you up, stop struggling,” Chopper begs.

Usopp levels a glare at the room at large before something cracks in his eyes. He drops his head and nods as Chopper guides him back up and starts leading him out the ruined hole of the door.

I clench my fists and watch them leave.

“Wow. Dramatic guy,” Franky whistles. Us three remaining Strawhats snap our heads to him with matching glares. He put his hands up in mock surrender. “Sorry, sorry. Well, if nothing, that's a party killer. We’ll be off to go get your materials, then. We should be back some time tomorrow, I can have one of my boys contact you where you are, we’ll find ya,” he promises.

I give him a stiff nod. “Thanks. Sorry for… sorry. The door,” I say lamely.

He nods and stands up, handing me an unopened bottle of cola as he passes me. “Feel free to see yourselves out,” he drops a hand on my shoulder and lets it linger for a long second before he moves on.

We make for the hole in the front of the house. Sanji carefully steers me around the debris so I don’t trip, and between one blink we’re back in the Yaguras’ and the next we’re off into the canals.

I lean my forehead on Robin’s back as she steers. “I kinda really fucked that up,” I say quietly.

Robin hums and I feel it vibrate through my face. “You missed one detail. You’ll get better, improve. Such is life,” she says, voice clear. “The deal went swimmingly for the most part. You did a wonderful job.”

I nod into her leather dress thing. “I don’t think I can go back yet,” I admit. “I’ll feel like shit if I face Usopp like this.”

She sighs. “I’m sure he feels similarly. If you want, we can stop at a cafe and give you both some time to cool down and reflect?”

“I can do a bit of shopping, we can go back in half an hour or so,” Sanji offers.

I take a deep breath. “Yeah. That might be for the best.”

_____

We end up abandoning our Yagura at one point or another to split from Sanji and continue our search for a cafe on foot. The narrow streets beside the canals are busy with people, and I nearly lose Robin a few times in the crowd. After she sees how jumpy it makes me the first few times, she lets me grab onto her hand as we swim through the crowd.

There’s a sudden influx of people rushing towards us, a gaggle of middle aged ladies loudly chattering about book club and the PTA or some shit, and Robin's hand is wrenched out of mine. I panic for a second as I lose sight of her and someone nearly pushes me into the canal.

My foot fully flies off the edge and I’m inches away from taking an involuntary swim when one of Robin’s hands grabs onto the front of my shirt and pulls me back to solid ground. She gives me a frazzled look. “It took a literal second of me having my eyes off you to nearly fall.”

I let out a long breath, grab onto her arm securely and shuffle away from the water. “Yeah ok, that wasn’t my fault.”

She gives me a doubtful look. Her arm shakes lightly in my grip, guess I kinda scared her with that stunt, oops. “Of course not, Detective.” I think about how different my title sounds coming from her mouth, fond compared to Usopp’s vitriol. I shiver.

I roll my eyes at her and start pulling her back down the walkway towards the cafe I'd spotted. Two orders of tea later, we're sat at a little table tucked back away from most prying eyes and ears. I take a long slow sip of my green tea, making a face when it burns my tongue.

"Detective, please feel free to disregard the question — but the place you're from, what was it called?" Robin suddenly asks.

I glance at her over the rim of my cup. "Canada," I say shortly, wondering where this is going.

Robin nods, a faraway look in her eyes. "I apologize if this is presumptuous, but Miss Navigator mentioned that your island was hit by a… Buster Call," her fingers go tight against her cup as she whispers the word. "I'm sure you know my situation was much the same."

Ask the question. I think. *Ask the question and I'll tell you everything. Ask me if it was a Buster Call. Ask me where my island is. Ask me anything and I'll tell you.*

"It's… scary. Even to this day. People like you or I, who've seen the horrors committed by the World Government first hand, we'll never truly feel safe. To witness the deaths of so many others… It sets you apart from a normal person," she murmurs, stare going right through me. If she wasn't addressing me directly I'd barely believe she knew I was there. Her eyes seem to refocus on me. "Detective Domino, I worry we may be too similar."

My breath hitches. "It's not — It's not the same," I admit. "I watched no one die but myself."

It feels… wrong for Robin to compare her trauma to mine. Mine couldn't possibly equate to hers.

Robin takes a sharp inhale. "What do you mean?" she asks softly.

"I watched no one die but myself," I repeat. I have no other way to say it. "There was no fire or guns or Marines shouting orders. It was just me, and then it was over. I watched no one die

but myself."

Something shifts in her demeanour. "Ah," she says quietly. "Then maybe we aren't the same. It's one thing to be sullied by the deaths of others, an entire other to recognize the death of a part of you. I suppose it just makes us different kinds of dangerous." She almost looks… relieved?

"Robin… being traumatized doesn't make us *dangerous,"* I say cautiously.

She shakes her head. "No, but being pursued in the way I am is. I don't know if the circumstances of your… incident are just not as public as mine, but you don't seem to be as — forgive me — *highly prized* as my head is," she explains.

Ask the question. I pray. *Let me tell you.*

"Small mercies, I guess. Maybe… yes. Mercies," she finishes, more to herself.

That gives me pause. There's something in her eyes I don't like. It's… confusing.

"Robin?" I say quietly.

It snaps her out of her musings. "Apologies, Detective. But… I am much more dangerous to keep around, compared to you. I am… happy, you get this crew," she says with a small smile.

It only serves to make me more confused and upset. "Robin. Robin, you get them too. We're *your* crew too," I tell her, wishing I could scream it at her from a rooftop on the off chance that would make her listen.

She chuckles, this bitter humourless thing. "I suppose that's a nice thought."

“Robin—” I start again.

She cuts me off by standing up. “Let’s get you back to the ship now, Detective,” she says, taking my hand and pulling me up. I trail after her, confused, worried, and more than a little lost.

I squeeze her hand “Robin, I don’t ever want you to have to do something you regret to keep yourself safe again,” I say quietly.

She stops for a moment, not turning around, before continuing to pull me to the exit.

She opens the door and gestures for me to walk out it. I give her this quiet look, just to give her a view of the confusion and subtle desperation. I don’t want — *can’t* — let her do anything stupid. She just gives me a resigned little smile and pushes me backwards out the door.

“Ed my darling!” Sanji’s voice cries from behind me. I turn to meet him as he jumps out of his Yagura, a bag of some kinda green stuff over his arm. “You look just as radiant as when I left! Ah, but where’s Robin? Did she go on ahead?”

My heart leaves my body. I twist back around as fast as I can, head on a swivel looking for where Robin went. I can’t see her anywhere, how the actual *fuck* did she disappear so fast?!

“Robin!” I yell into the street. People side eye me and stare as I spin in place. I want to run down the street screaming at the top of my lungs but I don’t know which way she went and I’m paralyzed by indecision what if I pick the wrong direction and *lose her*—

“Ed, what the hell is going on?” Sanji asks, hand on my shoulder.

I give him a pleading look. “Robin’s gone.”

He nods like he doesn't understand. "Yeah..? Like I said, did she go ahead or—"

I put my hands on his shoulders. *"Sanji,"* I repeat, close to tears, "Robin is *gone."*

I see it click on Sanji's face. I spin back around and start calling Robin's name again. "What happened? Did she say something?" Sanji asks panickedly, joining in my search.

"She was saying weird shit and the vibes were *off,* but—" I cut myself off to slap myself across the face. Keep it together, Ed! Keep your shit together! "Fuck! You go that way, I'll go this way, meet back here after five minutes of walking!" I shout, taking off to the left.

Spoiler alert; I don't fucking find her. We spend half an hour just running around like headless chickens, yelling Robin's name and looking like complete psychopaths. We eventually find our way back to the cafe where we started.

"Ed, I think we should go back to the ship. She might have gone back there herself?" Sanji suggests gently.

I bite into my lip but nod. He guides me by the shoulders into the Yagura that has just been sitting here while we acted insane, the poor dear, then hands me the bag of green stuff he had been carrying. "You take care of the cilantro, ok?" he says with a soft smile.

I try not to cry and hug the stupid fucking bag of cilantro.

Chapter End Notes

Lmao sorry gang. If it's any consolation next chapter is worse and was written to make you scream and cry. Now that I think about it the one after that is pretty bad too... man school had me in a *mood.*

Ed forgetting Usopp gets beat to shit by the Franky Family is actually because when I wrote out the plan for this arc I completely fucking forgot they beat him up to get the money the first time. My ass thought they just took it on the sly and blanked out my boy being hurt. Then when I was writing it out and noticed I'd mucked the detail up I was like 'oh this is sufficiently depressing I'm gonna keep that in' so here we are.

Also in case you missed it (because it was added after the fact) art of Ed's sexy ass outfit for this arc is in linked the previous chapter.

Chapter 68: Chapter Sixty Eight: Say It To My Face If It Satiates Your Appetite

Chapter Summary

> *Renato Dall'Ara (2008) - Los Campesinos!*
>
> I blink at her a couple times before it registers that she was the one that touched me and I simply hadn't noticed her there until now. "Shit — sorry Nami, I wasn't paying attention," I apologize, scooting closer to her on the bench.

Chapter Notes

> This weeks song choice is a little bit ironic but by god if it doesn't work in a twisted way.
>
> Y'all ready for exactly 5,405 words of pure pain and agony? Maybe have a pillow nearby to punch for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everybody is back on the ship by the time we get there. Well — everyone but Robin.

Sanji beelines me right to the galley and has a cup of tea in my hands before I can even blink. I idly take a sip, then nearly fucking throw the thing when a hand lightly touches my back.

"Woah! Ok, sorry!" Nami yelps, jerking back from where she's sat beside me.

I blink at her a couple times before it registers that she was the one that touched me and I simply hadn't noticed her there until now. "Shit — sorry Nami, I wasn't paying attention," I apologize, scooting closer to her on the bench.

She gives me an incredulous look. "What the hell's got you so worked up?"

I take a long sip of my tea. “I lost Robin. Straight up,” I admit.

Nami blinks. “Lost Robin?” she parrots.

“How do you lose a grown ass woman?” Zoro questions from my other side. I yelp and nearly throw my tea again. “Calm down and pay attention!” he barks.

I scowl at him. “Fuck you. But, er — it’s a 40-60 chance she either got kidnapped or went with some kidnapper, the way she was talking prior to the… incident… has me not so optimistic for the former,” I say quietly.

“How the hell would anyone kidnap Robin of all people?” Zoro scoffs.

I make a halfhearted gesture. “Exactly. It’s probably blackmail. Probably us.”

Nami groans into her hands. “Do we know who?”

I sigh into my cup. “Yeah, I’m pretty much certain—”

“Hi Ed, how'd your meeting go?!” Luffy suddenly cheers, dropping down on my back from where he’s apparently kneeling on the table?

I don’t drop my cup of tea, but it’s a near thing. “Christ, Captain,” I curse. “Fucking warn a guy!” He just laughs, the shit. “Yeah, the meeting was… good. Yours?”

That sobers him up. “Well… we got some news about the ship, and I’ve made my decision,” he states.

I stare down into my cup and nod. “Franky is off getting some high class materials, and he said he’d draft us up some plans if we wanted. Unless you’d rather have something from that catalogue,” I say tonelessly, nodding to the magazine in his hands. “Buying new would be more expensive, but it’s not like we don’t have money to burn.”

“What?” Usopp’s voice asks from the doorway. “What are we building?” We all turn to see him, bandaged head to toe, walk inside followed by Chopper.

“I’ve decided to switch ships. We owe a lot to the Going Merry, but this is as far as she’ll sail,” Luffy explains, an insincere smile on his face. Usopp gapes at him. “There’s some cool options in this catalogue, but Ed’s right about money not being an issue, plus they said Franky was getting materials.”

Usopp lets out an incredulous laugh. “Ok, you can stop joking now. I’m sorry I let our money get taken, but Ed said it all worked out so you don’t need to—”

“Usopp, that has nothing to do with it,” Luffy cuts him off.

“Then what? You don’t have to hold back, just explain!” Usopp demands, voice edging closer to desperate.

“No,” I whisper, horror working its may into every cell of my body.

“I’m not holding back, it’s not about that!” Luffy responds, sliding off the table and past me to be face to face with Usopp.

Usopp stumbles forward. “Then why are you doing this?! What would give you the idiotic idea of changing ships?!”

“Knock it off — shouting isn’t gonna help. Calm down and talk!” Zoro demands, standing up.

“I’ll be calm when he stops saying stupid shit!” Usopp yells.

“Hey, let’s explain this one thing at a time—” Nami starts, only to be cut off by more yelling.

“Usopp don’t get so worked up, you’ll relapse!” Chopper cries.

“Who gives a shit?! Why are you all so calm when he’s making jokes like *this!”* Usopp shrieks.

“I’m not joking around! This was a hard decision for me too!” Luffy says forcefully.

“Oh yeah, I feel really bad for you!” Usopp sneers sarcastically, snatching the catalogue from Luffy’s hands and throwing it to the ground. “You’re already window shopping for a new toy! Not to mention whatever the hell Ed was talking about!”

“Stop,” I whisper, fingers going tight around my cup and tea sloshing over the side to burn them.

“Are you trying to pick a fight?!” Luffy grits out.

“I don’t want your damn pity, got it?! It’s clearly not about how much money we have, so what the fuck is it?! Is this some kind of fucked up punishment for losing it in the first place?!” Usopp hisses.

It was all useless. Every compliment, every gesture, every attempt to divert this — useless.

“THE GOING MERRY CAN’T BE REPAIRED ANY FURTHER!” Luffy screams.

Silence takes over the room and I hunch myself over my cup, staring down into my own horrified reflection.

"...What… did you say..?" Usopp stutters out breathlessly.

"I don't want to repeat myself. The Merry can't be fixed," Luffy says, sounding like the words are strangling him as he speaks them. "I wouldn't be saying this if we had an alternative."

Usopp drops to the ground and slams his hands into the deck. "This ship? The ship we're riding on right now?! It's broken?!"

"Yeah. This ship that's about to sink," Luffy repeats. I can't see his face and I'm almost thankful for it.

Usopps face flattens out and he looks off to the side. "What are you saying, Luffy…"

"I'm serious. The shipwrights took a look at her themselves, she won't even make it to the next island," Luffy says quietly, like this conversation (if you can call it that) is wringing him dry.

"Ah, won't even make it to the next island… huh? That's how it is?" Usopp laughs incredulously. "A bunch of strangers you never met before convinced you to scrap your ship and gave up just like that?"

"What'd you say?" Luffy hisses.

"All it took was some first-class shipwrights telling you the ship, *our* ship, was done for you just accept it?! What about all our adventures, all our battles?! She's our friend! She's one of us! Are you gonna abandon her in a place like this?!" Usopp screams at the top of his lungs, voice cracking and raw. "Is that all this ship means to you, Luffy?!"

His shoulders hitch up and he curls in on himself as a wet cough claws its way out of his mouth, back bowing under the force of it.

I bite my lip hard enough a drop of blood rolls down and lands in my cup. I watch the red mingle with the tea and decide it's an ugly colour.

"Usopp you shouldn't yell like that!" Chopper begs.

"No. I'm not backing down until we settle this," Usopp rasps.

"Usopp, please…" Nami whispers.

"What? So you know better than the shipwrights? We don't have one, that's why we went to them in the first place!" Luffy snaps in retaliation.

"Fine, then forget about them! We don't need their help! I'll just fix the Merry like I always have! That's what's worked so far, right?!" Usopp says, sounding manic and like he's trying to convince himself.

"Usopp, that's not going to work," Sanji mutters around his cigarette.

"You're right, we don't have enough lumber. It's fine if you don't want me using that fancy stuff Ed was bargaining for, I can just go get some from the shipbuilding centre. We have a lot of work to do!" he mumbles, slowly crawling across the floor.

"You're not a shipwright, Usopp!" Luffy shouts.

"Luffy! Stop!" Nami gasps.

I tilt my head just right so the light from the sinking sun blinds me. I couldn't bear to look at any of their faces right now without the protection of spots dancing over their expressions.

Usopp reaches the catalogue he threw and crushes its pages in his palms. “Yeah, that’s true! So what?! I don’t see why you’re so hung up on what these stupid shipwrights say! To them, it’s just someone else's ship. They don’t know what she’s been through, they’ll just write her off!” he cries. “I don’t trust them! The Merry’s *our* ship! It’s up to *us* to protect her!”

“Stop,” I repeat, taking a breath so deep it makes my chest hurt.

“I’ll never turn my back on this ship! Are you crazy or just plain stupid, getting pulled in by a bunch of salesmen because they can give you a convincing argument?!” Usopp screams, twisting up and around to grab Luffy by the front of his shirt. “The Luffy I know would see right through that bullcrap and have faith in the Merry and her crew! Instead you’re acting like an *idiot* and ignoring anyones opinion you don’t agree with! I can’t believe that’s the kind of Captain you turned out to be, I thought you were better than that!”

“Hey, wait Usopp! Luffy felt that way too at first—” Nami tries to butt in.

“Stay out of this Nami! It was my call, and I stand by it! You can’t say anything to change my mind! We’re getting a new ship whether you like it or not! This is the end of the road for the Merry!” Luffy yells, getting right in Usopp’s face.

My god, this is just like my parent’s divorce all over again.

“Like hell! I’m not leaving her here! I know you're alway trying to think about the future, but not everyone on the crew is like that! The Merry is one of our friends and I’m not going to abandon her when she’s hurt!” Usopp yells right back.

“Don’t be stupid! Even if she is a friend, that doesn’t mean she’s a person!” Luffy snaps, slapping Usopp’s arms off himself.

Usopp grits his teeth hard. “She is to me! She still has the strength to live! But you wouldn't appreciate that — you’re just looking forward to getting a new ship to play with—”

“That’s enough, both of you! Calm down—” Sanji tries to interrupt, marching towards them even as Usopp keeps screaming.

“Stop being so selfish and think about your *crew!”* he demands.

Luffy grabs him by the shoulder and tackles him. I jolt up halfway to my feet before I freeze, my fingers tightening so hard on my cup the porcelain groans.

“CUT THE SHIT! You think you’re the only one torn up about this?! Everyone here feels the same way!” Luffy screams, slamming his shoulder into the ground.

“Then there’s no way you’d abandon her!” Usopp yells desperately, the back of his head thunking into the deck.

I watch Luffy’s mouth run away from him in real time. “All right then! If you don’t like my way of doing things you can just take this opportunity to—”

“STOP! ” I scream, cup shattering in my hands.

Sanji kicks Luffy hard across the face and sends him flying across the galley right past me, shattering the table into a pile of scrap wood.

Chopper gasps Sanij’s name and I watch his shoulders heave as this awful expression of terror and anger paints his face. “What the hell were you about to say?! Calm the fuck down before you do something you can’t take back!” he yells.

Luffy pushes himself up out of the wreckage with his head down, pulling his hat back onto his head. “Oh… sorry uh, I didn’t mean…” he says quietly.

“You don’t have to apologise,” Usopp breathes out humorlessly. “That’s how you really feel, isn’t it?”

Luffy’s head snaps up. “That isn’t true!”

“Just get rid of your dead weight and move on before they can slow you down. If you’re gonna throw away the Merry, might as well throw me away too,” Usopp grits out, pushing himself up on shaking arms.

“Usopp, stop saying stupid shit like that,” Sanji demands.

“No, I’m serious. I’ve been thinking about this for a while,” Usopp says, like it’s a fact, like he’s talking about the weather, like he's listing shit he wants added to the next grocery run. “Frankly, I can’t keep up with you guys' monstrous powers!”

My mouth opens. As if Luffy didn’t drag the most useless person he could find along with him from the second he set out. As if he didn’t save my ass at every turn. As if he gave a single fuck that I had never so much as held a weapon, just that I had a dream.

“It’s not like I have any skills you couldn’t replace. Like you said, I’m not a shipwright. You’ve got a fucking detective who can shoot just fine and is apparently six steps ahead of me at all times. You don’t need weak shipmates, right?” he spits bitterly.

My mouth stays open and no sound comes out. Any argument I had dies in my throat and gathers into a lump. How… how did this backfire so fucking badly? Does he really think that of me..?

“You’re gonna be King of the Pirates right? I don’t have ambitions like those! Looking at when I first set out to sea, you guys just invited me on your ship. That’s our only connection!

There's no point travelling together if we have completely different views!" he sneers, struggling to his feet and trudging to the door. He slams it open and marches across the deck.

"Hey, Usopp, where are you going?!" Sanji calls after him, voice ever so faintly tinged by desperation.

I hear him walk out of my view. "Where I go is my business. I'm quitting this crew," he says with complete finality.

My heart quivers, then shatters like so much porcelain in my chest. I can't make myself follow everyone as they all exit onto the deck. People are shouting after him. I can barely hear the rest of his speech through the roar of blood in my ears.

One thing rings loud and clear through.

"I CHALLENGE YOU TO A DUEL!"

_____

It could have been seconds, it could have been hours, but eventually people come back into the galley. I'm standing stock still right where they left me, staring dead-eyed into the middle distance and holding my fists in front of me while they drip blood.

Strong hands take hold of my shoulders and sit me down on a crate. *Right, our table broke.* I think distantly.

Little hooves take hold of my hands and gently uncurl the fingers. The pain brings me back to the present and I blink down at the bloody mess of my palms and jagged slivers of white embedded in them.

I blink again and look around the room. Zoro is stood against a wall looking frustrated and disappointed, Sanji is gingerly picking up larger shards of tea soaked porcelain and depositing them in the trash, and Chopper is right in front of me bawling his eyes out and he pinches a pair of tweezers between his hoof segments and stares at my mangled hands.

"Where's…" I croak, trailing off as the static recedes from my head slightly.

"Luffy's in the guy's room. Nami's trying to talk to him," Zoro grunts.

Chopper sniffs loudly and tweezes out a sliver. It *clink!'s* as it's dropped into a dish at his side.

"I — I went after… after U — Usopp, h — he's staying at an inn in town, but h — he told, *sniff* t — told me — " he interrupts himself with a hiccuping sob and my fingers twitch in his hold. "'We a — aren't crewmates an — anymore… so g — go back to the ship!'"

Clink!

The door swings open and Nami shuffles in, face twisted up in frustration and resignation. She crosses the room and drops on a different crate than mine and puts her head in her hands. "All the great times we've had until now feel like a big lie," she curses. "And on top of all this if something happened to Robin… I feel like our crew is falling apart."

Clink!

That more than anything, more than the pain of Chopper plucking another piece of porcelain out of my hand, makes me want to cry. My chest aches as I hunch in on myself, head between elbows to keep my hair away from hands, and hold my breath in some futile attempt to keep myself silent.

Clink!

I want to ask if he's almost done but if I open my damn mouth a sob is more likely to come out.

Clink!

"Do we have time to go look for Robin?" Sanji mutters. "We should have time before 10, right?"

Clink!

"You want to go look for her in the dark, be my guest," Zoro grumbles. "If she wanted to come back she would."

Clink!

"Don't say shit like that, idiot! Think about how Ed feels!" Sanji hisses.

Clink!

"What, like it's their fault? I'm being realistic. Maybe you should try it for once and get your damn head out of the clouds!" Zoro snaps back.

Clink!

"Both of you stop it! This isn't the time to be fighting!" Nami demands.

Clink!

“Ok Ed, that was the last one. I’m gonna clean and bandage your hands up now,” Chopper says quietly.

I don’t respond. I hope he doesn’t see how hard my shoulders are quaking under the force of my emotions. I feel scraped out and raw in a way I haven’t in years, not since my sister—

I digress. The antiseptic stings as he gently wipes the blood off my hands — and isn’t that just as heavy handed as a metaphor can get. It’s painted over glow in the dark stars in an airbnb, it’s poetic justice without needing explanation.

Chopper slowly and methodically wraps the bandages across my hands, twisting and folding it in a way that keeps it flexible but secure. It speaks to his experience and prowess as a doctor and if I had any confidence I could get my voice to work I would praise him to high heaven.

He just keeps his hooves gently on the back of my hands for a moment after he’s finished. “It… It’s going to be fine… right?” he asks quietly, voice shaking around the words.

I lift my head from between my elbows to stare at him, slack-jawed and red faced from holding back tears, and take one look at his desperately hopeful face and get hit with a wave of nausea so thick my vision blurs.

I shoot to my feet, sprint to the corner for the mop bucket and drop to my knees, then hurl my guts out.

There’s a couple shouts behind me as I sob into the bucket, more bile forcing its way up and out my burning throat. Frantic hands land on my back, pull my bangs out of my face, move the bucket closer. Someone’s talking in my ear and I couldn’t possibly hope to understand what they’re saying.

I think about the first time I puked in this bucket and who helped then and another torrent of sick floods my mouth. Someone begs for me to breathe and my bandaged hands ache as I

clench them on the rim of the bucket. I dry heave into the metal for what feels like forever before my stomach ceases its spasming.

I slump back into someone with eyes blurry from tears and someone else wipes my mouth off. The person holding my hair back lets go, I see my bangs drop into my eyesight and think idly *oh, I'll need a haircut soon.*

That's pretty much all it takes. I slap the hand away from my face and rip myself from the person I'm leaning on. I roughly swipe my arms across my face and take a chaste look at everyone huddled around me in various states of concern.

I shoot to my feet, hesitate for a second with my mouth open, then turn and flee from the scene. I all but sprint out the door, across the deck, into the aft and down the hatch into the ladies room. One look at Robin's empty hammock and I decide this room is much too large.

I scramble across the floor and tear open the doors of the armoire, shove aside some of Nami's clothes and that stupid Marine jacket I stole, and shut myself inside.

One deep breath then two.

I thunk my head down onto the backboard and blink into the darkness. "Well shit."

_____

"Ed? It's almost 10, are you down here?" Nami calls out some undetermined amount of time later.

"In here," I groan from inside the armoire.

There's a moment's pause before the doors are slowly opening and I squint into the dim brightness of the room. Nami stares in at me with concern and bewilderment. "…Why are

you in the wardrobe..?" she asks hesitantly.

I look around at the hanging clothes around me then back to her. "Fuck if I know," I reply, voice hoarse. "Never thought I'd go back in the closet voluntarily."

Nami's face twitches like she wants to crack a smile but nothing comes out. She reaches a hand beyond the threshold of the armoire and takes me by the forearm. I stumble out of it and nearly faceplant, thank god for Nami what would I do without her, and land on my half numb legs.

"Is he…" I mumble, holding onto her as she walks us to the ladder.

Her feet don't falter though her voice does. "It's almost ten. That's the time he set," she repeats.

Up on deck everyone is gathered but Luffy. I glance around and make eye contact with each of them, taking in their expressions. Sanji is failing to hide the shake in his hands as he lights up a cigarette. Zoro is doing a remarkable job masking the melting pot of emotions simmering under his skin. Chopper isn't crying, but it's a near thing.

Luffy's absence is rectified by him emerging from the hatch to the boys room behind us. "It's 10 o'clock. Usopp'll be here," he announces, voice steady and void of emotion. We all turn to watch him as he crosses the deck, eyes shaded by his hat as he passes us. I skim my fingers on his shoulder and he pauses for a second to look at me.

There's no nod, no exchange or words, no communication. It's not an understanding, just an acknowledgment. Then he's moving again and my hand drops through empty air.

We continue to watch him walk across the cape in the oppressive grey of night. The sky is a dense blanket of cloud and fog blows across the ground like it's trying to swallow my Captain's ankles. The wind wails like it knows what's about to happen.

“You guys stay on the ship. Do not get off,” Luffy orders.

Usopp appears from the fog like a fucking ghost.

There’s gasps and exclamations from Nami and Chopper before Luffy’s voice cuts back though the wind. “So you didn’t lose your nerve after all. No matter the outcome of this fight, you can’t regret it. You chose this fight!”

“Damn straight. Don’t go easy on me, I’ll turn the tables on you. Besides, I’ve already figured out how to beat you!” Usopp shoots back. “Don’t brush me off like all the enemies you’ve faced until now, I already know all your tricks. We’ve known each other a long time, I know your powers well.”

“Can’t we stop them? Usopp is still seriously hurt!” Chopper whines. My fingers clench over the railing, careful to not touch my palms.

“If you can’t handle it, go to your room,” Zoro tells him.

“I HAVE 8,000 HENCHMEN! IF YOU FEAR FOR YOUR LIFE, SURRENDER NOW!” Usopp suddenly screams.

Chopper’s jaw drops. “WHAT?!”

“Go to your room,” Zoro sighs.

“I KNOW YOU DON’T HAVE THAT MANY MEN!” Luffy shouts.

“A RAZORBLADE RUNNING BETWEEN EACH OF YOUR TEETH!” Usopp yells back.

Chopper screams and I slam my hands over my ears with a yelp. “Friendly fire! What the fuck!”

“Both of you go to your rooms!” Zoro squawks.

Luffy looks like he’s about to run forward in an attempt at an attack, but falters at the last second.

…What?

Usopp runs toward him himself. A little over halfway there he collapses to the ground with red spewing from his mouth. Nami and Chopper both gasp. “See! His body is still injured!” Chopper wails. Isn’t that ketchup?

Usopp suddenly lunges forward again and there’s a bright flash that lights the fog up in a way where we can’t see anything at all for a few seconds. When it clears we can see Usopp nail Luffy with several projectiles — rotten eggs that explode all over him as Usopp skips back away.

There’s some yelling we can’t make out from here, then Usopp shoots another projectile that lands squarely in Luffy’s open mouth. Luffy falls backwards with a torrent of flame spewing from his mouth. He yells out as he drops on a bunch of caltrops Usopp must have laid when we couldn’t see.

“Usopp’s controlling the fight…” Nami murmurs.

“Luffy, I’m gonna beat you and take the Going Merry with me! No matter what it takes!” Usopp announces, brandishing his slingshot and pulling out a long string of shuriken that he rapid fire shoots out at Luffy.

Luffy manages to dodge most of them, only a few nicks here and there, but I’m more distracted by the colour of the fog changing and becoming more substantial. Luffy seems to

notice it too, once that onslaught of shuriken is over.

“Gas,” Sanji says, horror in his voice.

Nami whips her head from him back to the fight. “No way!”

Usopp says something that has Luffy trying to stand up before Usopp fires some kind of flaming something into the smoke. The ensuing explosion is immense. There’s a solid wall of heat that slams into our faces seconds before the shockwave starts rocking the boat dangerously and the waves spraying water all over the deck.

I nearly fall over before someone slams a hand into my back to push me back upright. There’s a long moment where we can’t see a single hint of movement through the billowing cloud of smoke before it clears enough to give us a view of the scene.

Luffy is flat on the ground and Usopp is leaning on a rock, both of them panting heavily. I don’t see where Luffy’s hat has gone, but it’s no longer on his head or around his neck. Chopper cries out both of their names and Nami clenches her fists tight in her skirt. “Why did it come to this?” she whispers.

Our vantage point lets us see both Luffy getting to his feet and starting to run towards Usopp, and Usopp gearing up more ammo and aiming for him. Luffy bursts through the thin layer of smoke separating them with his first raised before he hesitates again.

“What is he doing..?” I murmur, brow creased. I don’t remember him hesitating this much, what the fuck is going on?

Usopp takes the moment to shoot out his projectile. Luffy does actually punch that, only for it to explode into a bunch of spikes that cut into his arms as he’s blown backwards. Usopp follows it up with a bunch more explosives that send Luffy cartwheeling across the cape before he starts pulling back his fist.

He stops himself before it even gets close to Usopp.

“Fight back,” I hiss under my breath.

Usopp blinks stupidly at him before his face twists up in an ugly sneer. He shouts something at Luffy before blasting a projectile into the ground. A white cloud of smoke billows out and obscures the area once more.

A sudden cacophony of different sounds; yells, singing, squawks, chittering, a whole mess of loud nonsense, starts echoing from the cloud before it all cuts out and a pained yell clearly from Luffy rings out and makes my heart clench hard in my chest.

“WHY WON’T YOU HIT ME?!” Usopp’s voice screams as the cloud clears out.

Luffy is down, and spits a glob of blood out before slamming his fist into the rough ground. “Ed said…” he groans, pushing himself up, “…you don’t fight your crewmates unless they’ve done something truly heinous or unforgivable!”

My heart drops. Whiskey Peak.

It’s my fault. Why is it always my fault?

“Yeah?!” Usopp shouts, sounding equal parts furious and desperate. “Well *I’m not your crewmate anymore!”*

Luffy’s head snaps up with pain written all over his face. Usopp nails Luffy with another projectile that sends him sprawling back on the floor.

My shoulders hunch and I squeeze my eyes closed. “FOR THE LOVE OF GOD DEFEND YOURSELF!” I scream.

Luffy lets out this gut wrenching yell before there's a heavy thunk. When my eyes open Usopp is on the ground and Luffy is reeling his first back in for another hit. It connects with Usopp's hand as he tries to block the blow to his chest, and there's a pause as no kickback from the attack hits.

Then Usopp slams that hand into Luffy's face. Luffy's neck snaps back at an angle that would mean death for anyone else, and both him and Usopp fly back in opposite directions. Usopp lands hard on his back leg and lets out this strangled cry as he grabs the arm he used.

"An impact dial!" Nami gasps.

"How do you like that, jerk?! Usopp screams.

Luffy catches himself on his feet. He reels his arm far back, then sends it into Usopp's stomach with a force that makes me feel sick all over again.

Nami clutches her head in her hands with these awful wheezy hisses. Chopper screams out Usopp's name. My fingernails dig gouges into Merry's poor railings.

Usopp goes down hard. Onto his face, then onto his side. There's just silence and the heave of Luffy's chest for a long moment before he drops to his knees.

"...The fight is over," Zoro says, softer than expected of him.

Luffy grabs his own wrist. "You idiot… THERE'S NO WAY YOU COULD DEFEAT ME!" he screams, back bowing before he struggles up to his feet and walks away, plucking his hat from the ground where it fell and making his for us on the ship.

Nami sobs into her hands. "I can't take any more of this!"

Luffy places his hat back on his head. “Do what you want with the Going Merry,” he announces, not turning back to Usopp. “We’re getting a new ship, and we’re sailing forward!”

My chest hitches in tempo with Nami’s beside me.

Chopper screams Usopp’s name again and goes to jump the rail. Sanji grabs him by the backpack before he can make it very far. “Hey! Don’t go, Chopper!”

Chopper looks back at him with a desperately confused look. “Why?! He was already in bad shape, and to just leave him after that beating…”

“This wasn’t just any old fight,” Sanji says, right before Chopper snaps into his bigger form and smacks his hands off.

“So what?! I’m a doctor! Let me tend to him at least!” Chopper begs.

Sanji grabs him by one giant shoulder and slams him into the railing. It creaks ominously under his weight and Sanji gets right in his face. “He lost his challenge, the last thing he needs is your pity. Think about how that would make him feel!” I bite my lip hard. “You trying to help right now would just make him feel worse! He made the challenge knowing what the outcome would be.”

Luffy stops a few feet away from the Merry with his head down. “This is too much..!” he whispers, voice raw and arms shaking.

“That’s the burden of being a Captain,” Zoro says unflinchingly. “Don’t doubt yourself. If *you* start becoming unsure… who can we have faith in?”

Chopper shrinks down under Sanji’s grip, jumps the ship, and runs over to where Usopp is. He leaves a plethora of medical shit before running back.

“Let’s leave the ship to him. This is it for us, we can never return to this ship,” Zoro sighs.

I take one look at my Captain’s shaking shoulders as he cries in earnest, and come to the quiet conclusion I might just not be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Ed feeling feelings so big they make them psychically sick is their version of Zuko getting ill after doing one good deed.

Bet you didn't think I could possibly make this whole mess worse, but here we are. I have a talent for it, truly. Deep breaths, nerds. Everything will be fine.

Chapter 69: Chapter Sixty Nine: I’m A Pretender At Heart

Chapter Summary

Glory Glory - And The Kids

“Guess I’m more like my dad than I thought,” I murmur humorlessly. I trade cola for peach and chug.

Chapter Notes

This song is just so perfect for Ed rn godbless this incredible band.

The fabled POV switch happens this chapter, indicated by ~~~~~~~.

Just ah, as a note, I do not condone alcoholism and drinking yourself into a stupor is never a good idea. Don't become an alcoholic, you will not have The Visions™, you'll just ruin your liver.

Last chapter was over 5 fucking k so this one is under 4k, everything evens out in the end. Anyway enjoy Ed having the worst night of their life!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's with numb hands that I gather my things from the bottom of the wardrobe.

My clothes, including the Marine jacket, are already packed away. Items I haven't so much as looked at since the start of our adventure like my phone and keys are shoved into my bag without a second thought. My Transponders, the laces of my destroyed shoe, my sunflower seeds, my seastone chunks, and my jewelry box follow.

I startle when a hand lands on my shoulder.

Nami's face is apologetic when I turn around. “Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. I said I'd gather Robin's things, since she isn't back yet.”

And that's another punch in the gut.

I guess Nami sees how that cut on my face because hers immediately drops. “No, you have to get your tangerine trees, right? I can…” I trail off, mind too scattered to finish my sentence.

Nami shakes her head. “No, I asked Sanji to help me. It's covered.”

I nod absentmindedly. “Ah. Ok. I have to get my schnapps,” I mumble, picking my bag up and making my way up and out the hatch. I ignore Nami's concerned look as I go.

I hardly register anything from then on. Chopper taking posters and notes from our memento wall. Sanji asking if I’m alright. Zoro helping me off the ship. Luffy pushing me through the doors of an inn lobby. Nami pressing a room key into my hands.

The cold feeling of the cola bottle Franky gave me what feels like a lifetime ago drags me back to reality kicking and screaming. I look down at the unopened bottle, then to the crate of schnapps beside me. I sink down to the ground, back to the wall.

I take a cursory look around the room I’m in. A simple bed, a small dresser and desk, a big green potted plant, a hall that looks like it leads to a bathroom and closet, and another that could lead anywhere.

I turn the bottle over in my hands, watching the bubbles of carbonation swirl around in circles. My eyes trail back to the schnapps almost unwillingly.

“Guess I’m more like my dad than I thought,” I murmur humorlessly. I trade cola for peach and chug.

_____

Zoro shows up when I'm knee deep and halfway to alcohol poisoning. He's sat up against another wall so I do what any normal person would do and crawl across the room so I can sit beside him and ramble my drunk little heart out.

"Heeey bestie. So funny story; I haven't been this shitfaced since the last time I saw my dad. My mom made me go to this family gathering because 'despite everything you should still connect with your family,' that *bitch* . My aunt had to take me home cuz I wouldn't stop crying. He just looked so *disgusted* . She's so great, she's the reason I learned salsa—" I ramble.

It could be hours, it could be minutes that I keep that up. It could get better, or worse I really wouldn't know. I might move onto a very detailed description of my cousin's quinces, I may stop talking entirely. I definitely start crying at some point.

Zoro doesn't say a word the whole fucking time, the fucking shrub. "I know you're the strong silent type, but this is getting a lil hurtful baby boy," I slur, taking another gulp out of what must be my tenth bottle or something. "Did you shower? You smell better than usual."

Zoro doesn't answer. Fucking mossball. "Anyway, my uncle — dad's brother to married the cool aunt — once got me stuck in a tree and I cried sooooo much because I was alone up there for like a fuckin' hour. Ohmygooood that may be where my abandonment issues started —"

~~~~~~~

"Zoro," Nami murmurs.

"Uh huh," Zoro grunts back.

"I think we need an intervention," Nami continues.

"What makes you say that?" Zoro hums.
~~~~~~~

“Ed is talking to a potted plant because they think it’s you,” Nami deadpans.

Zoro furrows his brows and walks over to where Nami is poking her head around the corner of the short hallway connecting the little common room thing with the rooms the rest of them are supposed to be staying in — not that anyone else is there anymore.

He peeks his head around the corner and feels his expression flatten. Ed is in fact leaned up against a potted plant, crying, and rambling on about god knows what. “How the fuck did this happen?”

“They’re drunk. *Really* drunk,” Nami groans, gesturing to the myriad of empty bottles on the floor.

Zoro shrugs. “I drink all the time, how bad can it be?”

“You’re such a good listener, Zoro!” Ed wails from inside the room.

“Ok point taken,” Zoro mumbles at Nami’s pointed look.

Nami bites the metaphorical bullet and walks into the room. She walks all the way up to be standing right infront of Ed before they notice her. They immediately stick their arms up with a bright sunny smile. “Nami!” they cheer, pulling her into an impromptu hug.

Zoro snickers to himself at the bewildered look on Nami’s face as Ed shakes her back and forth. “Er — Hi Ed. How’re things?” she asks awkwardly, patting Ed’s arms.

Ed leans back enough to give her truly pathetic look, like a soaking puppy left out in the rain. “Terrible! Nami I suuuper fucked this part up!” they wail. “I tried soooooo hard to avoid this *shit* but it happened anyway and if I can’t fix some stupid miscommunication how the fresh fuck do I fix the other stuff?!”

Nami shoots Zoro a look over Ed's shoulder that he returns. "What do you mean? What other stuff?" she asks.

Ed flops over onto the plant. "Auuuuugh the *other stuff!* Oh by the way why didn't you tell me Zoro was suuuch a good listener? He hasn't said a word this whole time! But if I bungled *Usopp* up I'm gonna bungle *Ace's bitchass* up too!" they whine, swinging Nami's arm around.

Nami's face scrunches up in confusion. "Ace? What does he have to do with this?"

Ed throws their head back and groans. "God Nami keep up! The fuckin'—" they make a weird gargle sound, "dad thing! And the other stuff!" They smack their hand into the wall and bury their head in the other. "GOD, AND ROBIN! Literally took my eyes off her bitchess for A SECOND! Slippery fucken — Who even — It was probably that bull-lookin' fucker — AUGH!"

"You are literally just stringing words together. None of those words were a real sentence," Nami mutters.

"Fuckin' BALLS Nami we're gonna have to murder the murder cat and the fucking giraffe from Madagascar!" Ed groans, repeatedly smacking the wall. "And that *stupid fucking beanbag and soap bar!"*

Nami shoots him an even more confused look than before. "What? You know what, nevermind. Are you good over here?" Ed groans again and nods. "Cool. I'm just gonna…" Nami shuffles back over to Zoro with a bewildered look.

"What the fuck did any of that mean?" she hisses, ducking back around the corner.

"I haven't the foggiest," Zoro deadpans. "I think I left my 'Drunk Ed Dictionary' on the Merry."

Nami shoots him a glare. “Watch your jokes, buster. I’ll kick you in the shins and I’ll find a way to make it hurt.”

Zoro rolls his eyes hard enough to hurt. The two of them stand in the hall for a long moment, just listening to Ed’s ramblings from the other room and thinking. Well, Zoro isn’t thinking. He’s just standing there. Menacingly.

“Hey,” Nami suddenly starts. “Don’t you think it’s a little weird how Ed… knows stuff?”

Zoro blinks at her a couple times, deadfaced. “You think it’s weird how our detective and First Mate… knows stuff?” he asks slowly.

Nami’s cheeks go pink and she scoffs. “No! I mean how they always seem to know things before they happen, or they make batshit deductions with absolutely no evidence. And the predictions!”

Zoro sighs. “You mean the bets? Maybe they’re just insanely lucky, I don’t know. They’re always right, and I don’t really care why,” he says snappily, leaning his head against the dull, chipped, yellow painted walls.

Nami frowns and she just looks back at Ed for a long moment. Then she blinks and looks back to Zoro. “Wait... If you know Ed's always right, why do you keep making yourself look like an idiot by betting against them?” she asks incredulously.

Zoro glances at her out of the side of his eyes before training them on the opposite wall. “Did you know when I first met Ed they didn’t have a single berri to their name? Not one. They once told me that 2,500 berri they won off me in our first bets in Orange Town were the first berri they’d ever made.”

Nami blinks at the declaration. She looks back at Ed again with a new hint of understanding in her eyes. “Is that right?” she says softly.

Zoro hums. “You know what they used that berri for? Getting us equipment for the Grand Line and a chocolate bar they gave to Chopper. So if me looking like an idiot for repeatedly taking suckers bets keeps their pockets lined so they can keep doing what’s best for us, so be it.”

Nami blinks at him once. Twice. He blinks back. “Wow, you really are a big softie at heart, aren’t you?” she snickers.

Zoro squawks and pushes off the wall. “Shut up!”

Nami laughs some more before quieting. She takes a good long look at the floor. “Guess it doesn’t really matter, Ed knowing things. They take pretty good care of us,” she sighs, soft smile directed down. She pushes off the wall herself. “That should be reciprocated some times,” she announces, spinning around and going back into Ed’s room.

Zoro watches with amusement as Nami tries to corral Ed up and away from the plant while simultaneously pulling their… fourteenth bottle of alcohol away from them. Yeesh, they are gonna feel like *shit* tomorrow.

“Zoro! Help me!” Nami yells, failing miserably in trying to fight off Ed pulling her to the ground.

Zoro takes a moment to laugh at her before going to help. “Alright, where are we going?” he chuckles, gathering Ed up from being sprawled on the floor in an ungraceful pile of limbs.

“Bathroom,” Nami bemoans, pushing herself up and trying to pat her hair down after Ed had stuck their hands all up in it. “Stick them in the fucking bathtub.”

“Oh my god Zoro, why didn’t you tell me you had a cousin! Twin brother? …Evil clone..?” Ed mutters, grabbing onto Zoro’s arms before flopping their head onto his chest as he heads for the bathroom.

“You’re really dumb when you’re drunk,” he tells them.

They make a protesting sound and mush their face into one pec while the hand that was on his bicep migrates to the other. “M’still smart! Suuuuuper smart! I can name every country in Europe and Africa in under ten minutes!” they whine.

“I have no idea what that is,” Zoro deadpans, setting them down in the bathtub. “Why are we putting them in a bathtub?”

Nami stomps into the room behind them. “I don’t know. Doesn’t spraying drunk people with cold water fix something?”

Zoro shoots her a look. “No. That could actually knock them unconscious and put them in danger. Who the fuck taught you that?”

Nami shrugs. “Alright, then what do you suggest?” Before either of them can do anything Ed has already lunged for the tap and turned the water on. “Ed you shit!” Nami squawks, lurching after them. They bat at her hands until she lets go.

“But s’warm! You said cold was bad, so wha’s wrong with a warm bath?” they whine as the tub starts to fill with said warm water.

Nami looks over at Zoro. “Is there something wrong with a warm bath?”

“As long as it’s not hot enough to dehydrate them and you give them water after it should be fine,” Zoro grunts, heading for the door. “This is your problem, I’m going to the roof.”

Nami squawks. “Hah?! You’re just leaving me here with them?!”

“I’m washing me and my clothes, bitch. I’m washing me and my clothes,” Ed slurs, swishing their arms through the water.

“What the fuck does that mean?!”

~~~~~~~

Everything is fuzzy like being dropped face first in a foam pit at Sky Zone, which is to say it kinda hurts but it’s alright enough I don’t wanna die yet. I muffle a groan into something or other and it shifts back against me.

I try to peek an eye open but my eyelids are so goddamn heavy all I manage is a glimpse of orange before they’re closing again. “Nami?” I mumble.

I’m suddenly being jostled and set down on something cushy and soft. My whole body relaxes and I ever so faintly feel my arms slip off someone's shoulders.

“Yeah, Ed. It’s me,” Nami’s voice responds. A warm blanket is draped over top of me. “You’re a real fucking handful when you’re drunk, just so you know. I’ll charge for this service next time, but consider this me paying you back.”

I make a confused hum. Nami’s hand smoothes my bangs out of my face and settles on my forehead. It feels cool and I press up into it and try to grab onto her somehow.

“No no no, you’re not pulling me into this with you. I’m going to turn the lights out and you’re going to stay on your side so you don’t choke on your own vomit,” Nami scolds.

I whine and smoosh my face into what is probably a pillow. “Pleeeeease stay? Just for a little bit?”
~~~~~~~

Nami moves my head so it isn't in the pillow. "If you're gonna do stupid shit that could — once again — make you choke to death on your vomit, then fine. Just for a bit," she says, voice soft and tone fond.

I give her as dazzling a smile as I can manage. "You're the best," I mumble, trying to flutter my eyes open and failing. "I don't ever want you to leave."

She scoffs out a laugh. "I'm gonna go eventually, I'm not babysitting you the entire time you sleep."

I gently shake my head. "No — you can go when I'm asleep. Just — don't…" I trail off, coherence and articulation slipping between my fingers. "Just… don't *leave…"*

Nami's breath hitches and gentle hands run through my damp hair. "Oh. Yeah, Ed. I'm not gonna leave again, promise."

I sigh and let go of my grip on reality. "Good. Good."

———

I'm in the sea, that's the first thing I notice. I'm floating in the sea with blue surrounding me at all angles, not a cloud in the sky and no sun to speak of. It's disorienting. I try to kick my legs but they feel heavy as lead, my arms the same.

I start to struggle. The water, once calm and simply holding me, starts to lick and pull at me like it's trying to steal me for itself.

A gentle hand soothes down my shoulder. "Hey now, you can calm down," a voice says, sounding like it's echoing from leagues under the water. "It's alright, you're alright."

"Where…?" I sputter, water rushing into my mouth from the sides when I open it.

The second hand joins the first and lifts me slightly so my head is above the water level. "Easy, you're okay," it croons, still muffled

"Where am I? Who are you?" I croak, trying to twist my head.

The voice shushes me and an arm wraps across my shoulders in a soft sort of hug. "It's okay. You're gonna be ok," the next word is garbled, like a jetstream of water getting caught in their speech. A name..?

"What did you say?" I ask breathlessly, hands heavier than the weight of the world but still coming up to clutch at their arm.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I should have gotten here sooner, I'm so sorry," the voice warbles, sounding near tears but much clearer than before.

"Why are you sorry? Who are you?" I ask desperately. The voice, now identifiable as distinctly male as it becomes clear as a bell, lets out this muffled half sob half cough. "Are you ok? You sound hurt."

The cough becomes a wet laugh. "You're always worrying about me. I wish you'd put yourself first for once—" he cuts himself off with another wet hack and I feel something warm spray across the side of my face. My thousand pound hands gently touch it and bring it to where I can see.

The red on my hand is stark against the oppressive blue of the sky. My mouth goes to form a name before my tongue catches itself. "Are you alrig—"

"This kinda sucks," his voice interrupts me. "I'm really gonna miss you."

Confusion sweeps over me. I try to kick my feet out again and this time they find sand and make purchase. I kick myself upright and twist around to look at the person holding me, but when I turn, he's gone.

The phantom feeling on his arm around my shoulders lingers like his voice in my ears and I spin around in the endless blue landscape. There's nothing as far as the eye can see.

"Hello? Is anyone out there?!" I call, semi desperate.

I try to take a step forward and my foot catches in the sand. I splash forward, catching myself in the suddenly elbow deep water. My own blood splattered face blinks back at me from the water.

Or — that might not be my face at all. It's certainly similar, but the moles are in all the wrong spaces and the eyes are a startling golden colour, not to mention the hair. It's the same green as my dyed chunks, but impossibly long and falling out of a thick ponytail.

I furrow my brow and the reflection does the same. I raise my hand to ghost over their image and they do the same. "Who..?" we both mouth.

Their head suddenly snaps to the side and I jerk back. Their mouth moves like they're shouting a name and then they're off like a shot. The reflection disappears into the omnipresent light reflecting off the water.

"What the fuck? What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck—" I mutter, scrambling back in the sand until my hand lands on nothing and I sprawl back into the water, the ripples immediately grabbing onto me like they're hungry.

It's scary — but just for a second. As soon as my head is under the water it doesn't feel malicious; it doesn't feel like drowning at all. It feels good, like a full body hug from head to toe. It feels like being cared for.

I let myself sink.

_____

It's a sledgehammer to the skull that forces me awake. Or at least that's how it feels. I try my best to restrain myself from screaming into my pillow as I roll over and *oh,* make that six sledgehammers.

I lay there paralyzed by the hot spike in my head for what feels like forever before the irresistible urge to get some water and painkillers becomes too much. I crack my eye open and valiantly resist the urge to finally find out what would happen if I died in this world too, then take a quick sweep of the room.

It's dark (thank god) and after I spot the four little pills on the nightstand beside a tall glass of water and a note I refuse on principle to read right now I don't bother looking for much of anything else.

I gulp down two of the pills and a huge mouthful of water without a second thought. Then I shove my face into my pillow and wait for the marching band playing a drum solo in my head to fuck off. When I finally feel like I could move without killing a small village with the amount of pain I'm in, I turn back over to read that note.

I recognize Zoro's chicken scratch script immediately.

Morning, idiot. If I had it my way you'd suffer through the consequences of your actions because drinking your pain away is a shitty coping mechanism but we kinda need you on point right now so take whatever the fuck Chopper left out. Meet us on the roof whenever you're ready so we can plan our next steps.

Jackass. I roll out of the bed and sway a little on my feet before I get my bearings. Nami's angelic ass must have put me in pyjamas last night, I'll have to buy her something pretty to thank her. I pull on the first pair of cargo pants I pull out of my bag shrug on a random button up, a yellow thing with embroidered swirls.

I snag my gun belt off the table, stuff the extra two pills in my pocket, and stumble through the room and out the door. A quick walk of the hallway brings me to a stairwell that I ascend all the way up until I reach the door. I pause at it when I hear yelling. I can't really make out any words but my stomach sinks at the implication.

I slam the door open. Sanji and Chopper are stood side by side on the other side of the roof, with Zoro sat against a bell tower and Luffy sat atop another tower. Nami is stood closest and puffing breath like she just ran a marathon and stares at me with wide eyes. "Ed. The mayor was—"

I cut her off with a hand. "I know. We have work to do."

I know where Robin is going to be, and I know exactly what their plan is. Time to pull up my fucking bootstraps and play these sons of bitches like the cheep kazoos they are.

Chapter End Notes

Funny number chapter was not very funny. Oops.

Happy Christmas Eve to those who celebrate, consider this chapter an early gift from me to you xoxo. (If you don't celebrate then you get it too because I like getting gifts year round anyway.)

Chapter 70: Chapter Seventy: I Know You Got Plenty To Offer Baby, But I Guess I've Taken Quite Enough

Chapter Summary

Candy - Paolo Nutini

I glance over at Luffy, who's sitting beside me on the bench seat. He hasn't smiled once since yesterday and it's making me feel fucking gross. "I gotta meet Ice guy one more time," he says, eyes trained forward until he looks at me. "Do you know how we can get in?"

Chapter Notes

Gang. Gang I own a sword now. My sister bought be a sword. My sister bought me *Kikoku*. I own Law's sword. Like it's just a standard katana it's not a nodachi but still. Sword. I own sword.

Anyways we're back to business with this chapter so yeehaw Ed gets to be funny again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Everyone loved and respected this guy, right? I'm gonna go check things out," Luffy announces, standing up from his perch to jump down to another roof.

"Wait, I'm coming with you!" Nami shouts after him, turning to run for the staircase.

"Me too!" I add, following after. I point back at Sanji and Chopper. "Y'all are gonna look for Robin, yeah? If you find her, tell her I'm not mad, just disappointed!" I pause in the doorway for a second. "Oh, I almost forgot! Aqua Laguna is coming, so uh, get ready for that!"

Sanji flashes me a slightly confused thumbs up, then Nami is grabbing my wrist and dragging me down the stairwell at double speed.

Nami shoves me into the back seat of a Yagura Luffy is already waiting in, and wastes no time peeling out of the… water parking lot… outside the inn in the direction of the Galley-La head office. “What the hell is an Aqua Laguna?” She asks as we go up the water elevator thing.

“It’s a big fuck off wave that hits the island once a year, we sure picked a nice time to come here. It’s scheduled for — if not tonight, the next couple days,” I explain.

Fuck, does it happen tonight? I don’t remember if this all goes down tonight. I’m too stressed for this shit, why did I choose such a stressful lifestyle?

The Yagura is forced to a stop when we run into the crowd outside the gate to Dock One.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to get in anywhere at this rate. It’s not like we have any more of a leg up on getting in compared to these people, they’re all worried about their mayor,” Nami murmurs.

I glance over at Luffy, who’s sitting beside me on the bench seat. He hasn’t smiled once since yesterday and it’s making me feel fucking gross. “I gotta meet Ice guy one more time,” he says, eyes trained forward until he looks at me. “Do you know how we can get in?”

I sweep my eyes over the crowd. Franky would be dropping in to kick our asses if I hadn’t interfered, and then the Galley-La foremen would crack down on our heads. “We’re gonna have to break in,” I say lowly. “Our best bet is to circle around on land.”

“Hey,” someone whispers harshly from right beside us. I jump and whip my head around. One of Franky’s lackeys, all dolled up in the fishnets and everything, is on a Yagura right beside us and I didn’t even hear them pull up. “You’re that detective kid, right? Big bro Franky is back with your materials. What’s going on?”

I exchanged glances with Nami. “Uh. The mayor got shot. Hey, quick question. How close is Franky, like, right now?”

The guy blinks at me. “Mayor Iceberg got *shot?* Didn’t see that coming. Big bro Franky’s nearby, why?”

“I gotta talk with him real quick, can you take me to him?” I ask, then turn back to my friends as I clamour over into the guy’s Yagura. “I’ll be right back guys, don’t move.”

They both nod, and the guy pulls his Yagura over to the side of the canal, then gestures for me to follow as he darts into an alley. I follow him around a couple corners until Franky comes into view, leaning against the wall like he’s annoyed he didn’t get to put on a show, with Mozu and Kiwi at his side.

“Hey dude, quick change of plans,” I greet.

He raises an eyebrow above the sunglasses. “Oh?”

“So, Iceberg got shot and we need to go see him so we’re gonna break into the building. Do you think you could cause a distraction out here so we can do it?” I ask.

Both his eyebrows shoot up and his sunglasses slide down his metallic nose. “Excuse me what?” A bunch of different emotions flash across his face in rapid succession before it settles into business mode. “Nevermind, I got it. Distraction I can do. You’re not gonna murder Iceberg, right?”

I scoff. “As if. He’s got plenty enough people trying to kill him right now without us adding to the mix.”

Franky frowns. “Ominous. How big scale a distraction are we talkin’?”

I tilt my head. “Enough to draw the bulk of the foremen outside. I don’t think they’d take kindly to us breaking in at a time like this, and I wouldn’t trust a couple of them as far as I could throw them.”

He nods. “Yeah, I copy. That it?”

I shake my head. “Nope, there’s more. First off, our crew has had a little… remodelling while you were out. And let’s just say the possession of our ship has changed hands, and my curly haired buddy your boys beat up is… not really a…” I can’t make myself say it. “Yeah, so he’s alone with the ship and it’s Aqua Laguna tonight. If you catch my drift.”

His mouth opens in an ‘ah.’ “Yeah I gotcha.”

“Also I’m almost certain Iceberg was shot because of You Know What, yeah I know about that don’t worry about it, and I’d recommend you either burn it or make sure no one knows where exactly it is. They’re liable to come after you next,” I add.

His eyebrows, which had just relaxed down, shoot back up over his sunglasses. “So you know about *that,* do you? You are one weird kid, little bro. I don’t even think you know just how suspicious you and your crew seem.”

I shrug. “We’re fuckin’ weird but we mean well, promise. You do what you think is good for you, as long as you don’t up and die. That would suck.”

He snorts. “You got it, little bro. One distraction, coming up!” Then he marches around the corner with the square sisters falling into step beside him.

I turn back to the guy who walked me over. “I don’t know how to get back to the canal.”

He gives me an incredulous look but guides me back nonetheless. When we get to the edge I wave my arms to get my friends attention, and when I get it gesture for them to come over.

By the time they make it over, the guy who escorted me has left. “So? What’s your plan?” Nami asks, stepping out of the saddle.

I open my mouth to answer, but am interrupted by music starting to play. We all turn our heads up and over to where it's coming from — the high bridge walkway that stretches across the canal. The crowd immediately starts freaking out as Franky's voice starts booming across the place.

"That's our distraction. I'll give us two minutes before the foremen come out, and maybe ten — if we're lucky — minutes before they're back to crawling the halls of Galley-La headquarters," I explain, pulling them both into the alleys.

There's an explosion behind us and the yelling gets louder. "What is he doing?" Nami hisses.

I shrug. "Whatever he thinks is best. I trust his judgement. Kinda."

Luffy stops walking and we do too. "You said we're breaking in? Then let's go up," he says, wrapping one arm around both me and Nami and stretching the other up to the rooftop beside us.

Jumping from rooftop to rooftop is… Well it's not my favourite activity, I'll tell you that. I always wanted to do parkour, but actually jumping across the gaps between buildings has never really stopped being scary.

We round the entire shipyard via roof, watching Franky blow shit up in the shipyard below. After an entire crane is knocked to the ground, I finally spot the foremen making their way outside. We continue to circle around until we can see the courtyard of the Galley-La headquarters mansion.

"Are those reporters?" Nami murmurs, leaning ever so slightly over the edge to stare at the crowd of people. Then her head tilts back with a frown as the wind whips her hair around. "This weather is getting me worried. If it keeps up like this with the pressure dropping and the wind, we're liable to get caught in a typhoon. And this city does not seem equipped to deal with flood damage."

“It happens every year, they know what they’re doing,” I promise. “They’ve got bunkers and such, and they board up their houses. You’ve seen the doors on the levels submerged in water, haven't you? The place is slowly sinking,” I murmur.

“We need to get into this building,” Luffy interrupts. “Can we just drop down there with those guys?”

I shake my head. “Bad idea. We should do our best to keep anyone from seeing us and recognizing who we are.”

Nami directs her frown at me. “Why? Do we need to be worried about whoever the shooter was?”

I grimace and briefly dig my nails into my palms before a light shock of pain from where I sliced them open spikes through me. “Considering I think it’s Robin, yeah.”

They both freeze and turn to me.

“What?” Nami whispers.

Luffy glares hard at me in a way that makes me shrink into my boots. “Robin would never do that.”

I involuntarily shiver. “Of her own free will? Never,” I say quietly.

“But you don’t think she’s acting of her own free will,” Nami infers. “You said she was probably kidnapped using us as blackmail before… before.”

I nod. “Despite herself, she does care about us. There’s nothing that makes a person stupider than love.”

The both of them are quiet for a second. “Ok, let’s just break in. I wanna ask Ice guy about it,” Luffy suddenly announces, pulling his arms back like he’s gonna slingshot them across the courtyard. Y’know, like an idiot.

My natural course of action is to tackle him to the roof obviously. “No you don’t, you goddamn menace! No attracting attention! I’ve got a hunch at least a couple of the people responsible for this are around, and letting them know we’re onto them is the stupidest thing we could possibly do right now!”

He frowns up at me. “But if they’re here, why can’t I just beat them up and make them leave Robin alone? That seems like a much faster way to deal with this!”

“You simple minded numbskull!” Nami curses.

“Your dumbass was probably going to crash through a window, were you?” I hiss, jabbing him in the forehead. “There’s open portholes right above them! We’re going in that way!”

He blinks, then looks over at the building again. “Oh. Yeah, I didn’t see those.”

I groan and drop my head on his chest.

———

“Nami, you wanna come?” I ask, tucking myself into Luffy’s side as he winds up an arm.

She makes a face, glancing from the portholes to us. “Erm — I think I’d rather live, if it’s all the same.”

I give her a thumbs up. “We’ll be right back then. If you hear screaming… no you didn’t.”

Then we're sailing across the courtyard towards the porthole I am rapidly realizing will be not only a tight fit, but a fucking miracle if we make it through without one of us splattering across the wall.

Luffy pushes my face into his chest with a hand on the back of my head, and we fucking spear through the hole feet first. The tips of my shoes leave skid marks across the dusty floor of the attic we enter and Luffy takes the brunt of the force when we slide.

"I can't believe that worked," I mutter, picking myself up and looking around. There's a hatch on the far side of the attic and I gesture over to it. "If I tell you to be subtle, will you be?" Luffy just shrugs. "Yeah fair enough."

I gently crack the hatch open and peek down inside. The halls are well lit, and there's a couple people walking around. I turn back to Luffy and slide my palms together, tap two fingers on my temple three times and hold up two fingers. *Lay low, danger, two people.*

He just tilts his head. My expression flattens and I slowly close the hatch and lean over. "There's two guys down there, so don't make any fucking noise," I whisper harshly. What's the point of my super sexy secret code system if we don't use it?

Luffy scratched his chin, considering. "Two guys, got it," he says, not really keeping his voice down at all. Then he opens the hatch and drops down.

My eyes bug out and I scramble to follow him. By the time I get down, there's two unconscious guys on the floor and Luffy is strolling away without a care.

I run a hand down my face. "Fuck stealth I guess. Two years straight of playing a rogue in D&D and this is what I get?" I grumble, stomping after him.

The shouting starts before I even round the corner. "HOLY SHIT IT'S STRAWHAT!"

Goddamnit. God-fucking-damnit. Was one stealth mission really too much to ask for?

I wait a couple seconds as the sounds of violence and screaming moves further down the hallway before I turn. I just kinda watch Luffy jump around the place from walkway to walkway, with people shooting guns and chasing after him with fucking sticks and shit.

"What did I do to deserve this?" I whisper to the ceiling, long suffering and emotionally exhausted. I follow the violence leisurely, not even fucking bothering to run or make myself unseen. By the time I catch up to the crowd they're all moving away from a door looking sheepish.

Not a single one of these fucking jokers even looks at me twice as I stroll up. The power of nonchalance I guess? Kalifa or whatever her name is is just standing outside the door watching me as I approach.

"Yo," I greet. "Can I get in there? I gotta get my Captain."

She stares at me for a long second before pushing her glasses up her nose. "Ah, you must be E. D. Domino. Yes, your Captain is already inside. I don't think adding visitors will be good for the mayor's recovery—"

"Hey," I interrupt. "Between the two of us, I'm the one least likely to give that guy a hernia out of sheer stupidity, and probably the only person that may be able to stop my Captain from breaking a window on his way out."

She stares at me for yet another long second, then sighs and opens the door. I slide in and it's shut behind me. When I turn and finally lay eyes on the scene, I have to heave my own sigh.

"Luffy, what the fuck did you say?" I ask, exasperated.

Luffy just shrugs and gestures to where Iceberg is sat in the bed with a pistol pointed at him. "I didn't say anything! This guy is just talking mad shit!"

“Dude why are you talking mad shit?” I groan, walking my own way over before he turns the pistol on me. “I’ve got a gun too buddy, two of em’. Don’t go pointing shit at me,” I scold, slinging an arm over Luffy’s shoulders. I squint at Iceberg. “Did you actually get shot and your lipstick still held up? God, what brand do you use?”

He blinks once, slowly, at me. “You are really annoying,” he says blandly. I do a shitty little bow. “I need a favour.”

“What can we do for you?” I say diplomatically.

“I need to see Nico Robin one more time,” he requests, face in a serious tilt.

“Don’t we all?” I say sarcastically.

“We don’t know where she is,” Luffy adds.

I put my hands up when I see Iceberg’s finger twitch on the trigger. “Dude, can we have a civil conversation? Turning to violence is against my pacifist nature.”

“Didn’t you yell at an Admiral last week?” Luffy questions, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

My entire face twitches. “We all have our moments.”

“Cut the circus act. Can you bring Nico Robin to me?” Iceberg demands.

“Did you even fucking read my message?” I groan. “After all the effort I went through!”

His brow furrows. “So that was yours, was it? An interesting story to be sure, but considering the circumstances I find it hard to believe.”

Ok I tolerate a lot of shit, but being questioned on my absolutely impeccable future knowledge by a dude who’s life I tried to save is where I draw the line. I slip my arm off Luffy and march right up to Iceberg’s bed, smack his gun out on my face and plant a hand on the bedspread, then lean right in his face.

“You listen to me, you absolutely gorgeous motherfucker — I tried to save your ass from getting shot. The best thing about me? I’m fucking brilliant when people listen to me. You should try it,” I say, poking a finger into his forehead. “So, why don’t you walk us through the events of last night and let's see where which of us went wrong, hm?”

He stares at me for a long moment before signing and putting the pistol down on the comforter. “Fine. You’re really bossy.”

I take a seat on the edge of his bed. “Thank you. Ok, start from the top!”

Iceberg sighs and strokes a finger down the back of the mouse that’s just kinda chilling with him. “Well there’s not an awful lot to tell, a masked man accompanied by Nico Robin broke into my room last night and shot me.”

I flop backwards on the bed with a groan. “Dude. Details.”

Iceberg makes a mock imitation of my groan. “I was sleeping, then there were people in my room, and then I was getting shot. A lot.” He gently places a hand over his chest. “Well… There was a moment before Nico Robin shot. She seemed to hesitate.”

That makes me sit back up. Luffy takes a step forward. “What do you mean, hesitate?”

Iceberg scratches idly at his IV port before he seems to catch himself. “Admittedly I was quite on edge last night, while your note was bizarre and I still don’t believe some of the

nonsense in it, I would be a fool to ignore someone making an attempt on my life. I find it quite foolish you'd say Nico Robin would be framed for a crime she undoubtedly committed, however."

I scowl at him. "Coercion is an extenuating circumstance."

His eyes are keen through whatever painkillers he's on. "Coercion? That may explain it. After they had broken in and Nico Robin had pulled her gun on me, she very much hesitated to shoot me. Then the masked man accompanying her cleared his throat, and she shot me. Three times, right in the chest."

I blink at him. "Three times? In the chest?" That…

He nods. "Yes. That was enough, I had all but passed out from blood loss by the time they departed."

Two shots in the front, three shots in the back. That's what should have happened.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you smiling at me getting shot feels quite rude," Iceberg interrupts my little victory celebration.

I look up to him and drop the smile I unconsciously let slip on my face. "Oh — Sorry dude, I'm not smiling at you getting shot. That would be kinda fucked — I'm just glad Robin didn't *want* to do it."

"Of course she didn't want to do it. Robin isn't like that," Luffy says firmly.

Iceberg eyes him for a long moment. "You truly believe that, don't you?" he murmurs. "A long time ago, someone I hold in very high regard told me to beware that woman."

“Because of her ability to read Poneglyphs, yes?” I ask, to which he nods. “I got to watch her read one,” I tell him. His eyebrows furrow. “It had the name and location of an ancient weapon.”

His hands clench in the bedspread. “Then she already knows where it is?”

I turn my gaze to the window. “It was the ancient weapon Poisidon.” His hands relax ever so slightly before re-tensing up when I look back to him. “She was quite disappointed about its contents. She’s only interested in history.”

Iceberg is quiet for a long moment, simply studying me. “Is that what she told you?”

I regard him with a sad mix of pity and destain. “Two of us have spent a significant amount of time with her and faced some shit that sounds like it came out of the mind of a hyperactive three year old, and the other got shot last night. Take a guess at who has more experience in this area.”

His face twists up and Luffy shuffles over to sit at the edge of the big bed.

I keep staring into Iceberg’s soul. “Don’t presume you know more about her than we do just because someone told you she was dangerous as a *child,* no matter how much you trusted that person.” He bristles. I let the disdain slip out of my expression. “I understand you’re trying to protect something. But so are we.”

“Robin wouldn’t be doing anything like what you said unless she had a really good reason,” Luffy states, not an inch of doubt in his voice. “If you don’t know where she is, we’ll leave now.” Then he stands up from the bed and makes for the window.

“She’ll be back tonight, and so will we,” I announce. Luffy pauses with the window open and a cold breeze shifts through the room. “They’ll send her back to finish the job, and I can promise you they’ll be bringing a fuller force this time. You know who I speak of.”

Iceberg stares down at his gun. “Cipher Pol. Figures that masked man was one of them. I still have trouble believing your list but… I shall be careful who I confide in,” he concedes.

I stand up from the bed to follow Luffy with a nod. “Trust your judgement. Unless your judgement is prone to trusting that,” I jerk my head toward the door where Kalifa was standing guard, “you’ll be fine.”

“I suppose you’ll want me to call my men off chasing your crew?” Iceberg calls as I join Luffy, who jumps up on the window sill.

“That would be nice, but if you can’t that’s fine. We’re good at running. Kinda,” I shrug, taking Luffy’s outstretched hand as he starts looking for a place to land us. I give him a two finger salute, and then we’re slingshotting across the sky onto an adjacent building.

Luffy starts pulling me by the hand in the direction we left Nami in. “Robin didn’t actually do it, right?” he says quietly.

I squeeze his hand. “Like I said, not because she wanted to.” His head dips down, though I can’t see his expression from behind.

It takes no time at all for us to get back to Nami. She’s sat right where we left her and watches us with a wary eye. “That didn’t sound like it went very smoothly,” she says slowly. “Did you get to talk to the mayor at least? What did he say?”

“Yeah, we talked to him. He said he really was shot by Robin,” Luffy mutters.

“This situation is so fucking complicated,” I murmur.

“Why would Robin…” Nami trails off.

“I need to know what was going through her mind,” Luffy says forcefully.

Me and Nami exchange looks and give out Captain solid nods.

_____

“OHMYGODOHMYGOD LUFFY SLOW DOWN YOU’RE GONNA KILL US—” Nami screams, tucked under Luffy’s other arm as we fall towards a rooftop.

Luffy slams feet first into it, stopping just barely short of smashing both me and Nami’s faces into the tile.

“Next time you’re gonna jump off a tiered fucking city, warn a bitch,” I groan.

“We’re here!” Luffy announces, dropping us both and recovering much faster than we do.

“‘WE’RE HERE?!’ Don’t give me that shit! I thought we were gonna die!” Nami howls, punching Luffy in the head.

“What else was I supposed to do?! You said we couldn’t use the elevator!” he whines, covering his head from any more blows.

Honestly it wasn’t that bad. After Skypiea I kinda missed being carried around by someone I knew wouldn’t kill me at the drop of a hat. And as scary as it had been, flying through the air felt fucking amazing.

“You didn’t have to fucking *jump* though! You’re not that shipwright with the weird nose!” Nami shrieks, standing up on wobbly feet. Her hair is swaying every which way because the wind has picked up so much. “Whatever, at least we’re down.”

“If it’s fine don’t hit me!” Luffy whines.

“Let’s get back to the inn. This weather just keeps getting worse,” Nami suggests.

I grimace. “About that… The entire town may or may not be gunning for our asses — depending on if Iceberg actually talked anyone down. Even then word won’t spread very quickly with the panic going around. The inn is probably compromised,” I explain.

Nami’s face drops. “Then where do we go?”

“I’m not saying we don’t go to the inn,” I rephrase. “That’s our rendezvous point, so unless we can meet with everyone before we get there, it’s our best bet at regrouping.”

They both nod. “Then let’s just try to be a little stealthy,” Nami says.

Both of our heads turn to Luffy as he sticks a finger up his nose.

“Easier said than done,” we both groan.

Chapter End Notes

Ed is an absolute bastard and I love them. They stand on business but would they really be Ed if a little bit of flirting wasn't a part of it? I love Iceberg. He's such a cool dude. (Ed is very much aware he is too old for them and incredibly out of their league.)

I also got a pocket watch for Christmas and like why didn't anyone tell me listening to a clock ticking all the time was so soothing? It's like this thing has it's own little heartbeat it makes me feel all warm inside.

OH also my sister, the absolute gem, not only got me a real sword she also got me tiny sword earrings and they're so cute but I'm so fucking shit at changing my earrings I lost the backing for my threadless studs and my ears hurt because again I'm so shit at it. Now

I want more piercings but I can't afford that many and I don't wanna have to heal them again T-T.

Anyway I hope all of you had an amazing Christmas if you celebrate, or just very nice hols if you don't.

Chapter 71: Chapter Seventy One: If You Don’t Love Me Now, You’ll Never Love Me Again

Chapter Summary

The Chain - Fleetwood Mac

“This is fucking exhausting,” I mutter to Nami, who just groans and slides a palm down her face.

Chapter Notes

I thought winter break was gonna be a super great chance for me to catch up on writing and instead I'm barely getting anything done T-T. On the plus side though I did get to write one of the fights I've been super excited to write since like Alabasta (even if it refuses to turn out the way I want).

It's well and truly hilarious that this fic is therapy for some of you considering *this shit* and the fact I have a therapist myself. She knows about this fic and to say she has *concerns* about it would be an understatement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wait, Luffy, someone is around the corner — THAT DOESN’T MEAN GO FIST FIRST *WAIT—”*

Luffy does not listen to me. He goes around the corner fist first.

“This is fucking exhausting,” I mutter to Nami, who just groans and slides a palm down her face.

“Oh, hey Zoro!” Luffy says from around the corner.

Me and Nami look at each other before turning it. “Oh. Hey Zoro,” we both repeat. Zoro waves, though he looks quite annoyed.

“Anyone care to explain why I’m getting chased down and being called an assassin?” he snarks with a sassy cock of his hip.

“Calm your tits, at least we aren’t dead,” I snark back.

“Small prizes. What the fuck are we doing?” Zoro deadpans.

“The assassin guys are coming back tonight with Robin. We gotta get everyone and go back to Ice guy’s place,” Luffy says.

There’s a sudden rush of footsteps from the way we came. “They fucking caught up!” Nami hisses, pushing us all further down the alley we turned into. “Bridge! Under the bridge!”

Under the bridge was a bad idea. “Zoro move your fucking knee,” I whisper, trying my best not to fall off Luffy’s stomach into the water.

“Stop moving or I’m gonna drop you,” Luffy whispers, shaking from the strain of holding onto the very edges of the bottom of the bridge. The clamber of people crossing the bridge slowly dies down until it's gone.

Luffy suddenly tenses up as a shadow falls over the side of the bridge. Then Chopper’s stupid face is leaving over the edge staring at us and Luffy screams and drops the whole lot of us in the water.

I hook my foot under him and drag us both to the surface, glaring up at Chopper as he screeches and flails. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to!”

“Just help us up!” I demand.

_____

“How did you find us?” Nami questions, wringing out her hair.

“Your scent,” Chopper says simply.

“Seems like we’re in the clear now,” Zoro says.

I drop down beside him on the flat rooftop we’re hiding out on. “For now. I don’t think the inn is a viable option anymore.”

“We were getting there just fine until he showed up!” Nami snaps at Zoro.

“Oh, were you? With the amount of people looking for us you would have gotten caught sooner or later,” Zoro shoots back.

“Hey, where’s Sanji?” Luffy asks Chopper.

His little face falls. “We… we found Robin,” he says quietly. We all freeze in place. “She said she wasn’t coming back to the crew. And that she really did shoot the mayor. She was talking about having some kind of darkness inside her that would destroy us. She wouldn’t tell us why she did it, just that it was a good thing we got the blame and it would be harder for us from now on.” He sniffs loudly. “She said she didn’t deserve it, but she was thankful we were kind to her.”

“She really said that?!” Luffy shouts, lurching forward.

Chopper just nods sadly, then turns to me. “I told her what you said. She said she was sorry she disappointed you, but that that was better than a different outcome.”

I try very hard not to dig my nails into my palms.

“And Sanji went after her?” Nami asks quietly.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. He said he was going off on his own for a bit.”

Zoro slams down Wado in the middle of our little circle. “We should have seen this coming. Regardless of the circumstance, we met her as an enemy and let her on the ship. There’s still a lot we don’t know about Robin. It’s time we settle this; is she a friend? Or an enemy?”

I dig my knuckles into the concrete of the roof. “Robin would never be our enemy,” I murmur. At Zoro’s sharp look I continue. “But as of right now, we shouldn't treat her like an ally that would go along with our plans. She most likely doesn’t see that as an option in these circumstances.”

He jerks his head at Luffy. “You said the assassins were going back to get the mayor tonight? And you really want to go back?” Zoro furrows his brows. “Isn’t that just what she wants? To have us show up at the scene of the crime? From what Chopper said, framing us seems to be her goal.”

“You’re making her sound like the enemy,” Nami mutters.

Zoro frowns. “It’s a possibility. I’m not leaning either way — if we start believing one is the truth and the situation turns out to be the other… we won’t be prepared. That’s why the way you,” he jerks his head at me, “are talking is so dangerous.”

“I understand the nuance of the situation,” I grumble. “I’m not optimistic she’ll work with us instead of against us, but I know Robin. She’s just trying to protect us, even if it’s from herself, the only way she knows how.”

He nods tersely. “As long as you keep in mind that she has the capability to hurt any one of us right now.” He turns to Luffy. “So are you sure we go back tonight?”

“We go,” Luffy decides without a second of hesitation.

“I’m fine with that, but how many people are we going to have to worry about? You keep saying *assassins* and that Robin was kidnapped, but by how many people?” Nami asks.

I think for a second. “Uh. I dunno. A smallish group? Four or five of them?” I guess. Fuck, I can’t count. Kalifa, Lucci, Kaku, Blueno… Is that it?

Nami and Zoro exchange some kinda look. “Alright, four or five people,” Nami says.

“So Robin was really kidnapped?!” Chopper gasps.

“Kidnapping is the best case scenario, camaraderie is the worst,” Zoro reiterates.

“The guy with her was in a mask, yeah? We have no way of knowing who was under it,” Nami grumbles. “So, what’s our objective?”

“To catch Robin,” Luffy says like it’s obvious. It kind of is. “We won’t know anything for sure until then, and sitting here is a waste of time,” he continues, rising to his feet and dusting off his shorts.

“It’s not like the government has been trying to catch her for twenty years and still hasn’t managed it, should be easy,” Zoro says sarcastically.

“If we want the truth, it’s just what we’ll have to do,” Nami states, getting up as well.

“I’ll do my best too!” Chopper shouts.

“Fuck it we ball, I guess,” I mutter, rising and shaking out my legs.

Luffy holds his hat on against the wind. “Alright. Let’s go.”

_____

“What are the chances the same plan as earlier would work again?” I ask, staring at the building through my spyglass and trying not to fall out of this tree. The only reason I haven’t yet is because Zoro has a hand on my shoulder.

“Watching you two idiots shoot through that porthole like threading a needle was stressful enough, I’m not fucking doing it too,” Nami grumbles. “Besides, we should wait until a commotion starts to do anything.”

“True. If we start a racket first they’ll just use it to their advantage,” Zoro adds.

I pass my spyglass to Chopper. “You’re on lookout duty. If something moves, let us know.”

He gives me a nod before retraining the scope on the courtyard. “All these guys look so tough, and they all have weapons…” he murmurs.

“They call them fighting shipwrights for a reason,” Nami remarks.

“If we go charging in without a plan, it could go to shit,” Luffy says, like there’s no irony in that statement.

“That is rich coming from you,” Nami voices my thoughts.

“This may take a while, nobody get sloppy. If we flub this we may never learn the truth,” Zoro instructs.

I jab him with my elbow. “11,000 berri someone’s gonna be blowing up the courtyard as a diversion.”

He rolls his eyes. “Aren’t we dealing with assassins? That’s too flashy. You’re on.”

Oh, I missed the beautiful feeling of impending triumph.

Nami gives us a long, weird look.

“It’s coming out of his share of the treasure, don’t get your panties in a twist,” I tease.

She scoffs and shakes her head. “Damn right it is. Giving him a loan just so he can pay you back is sad.” She shoots another meaningful look at Zoro. What the shit is going on there?

“Luffy, take that leaf out of your mouth,” Zoro berates, letting go of my shoulder to smack him.

Luffy scowls. “But I’m hungry, we haven’t eaten in like, two hours—”

The courtyard explodes.

Chopper screams and nearly fumbles my spyglass. I startle so hard I fall out of the tree. Zoro catches me by the ankle and my head smacks into the trunk.

He glares down at me and I grin up at him. “11k EASY!” I cheer.

“Not the time!” he barks back, pulling me up by the ankle.

The shouting from the Galley-La headquarters is loud enough it echoes all the way to here. “It’s getting pretty rowdy over there,” Chopper squeaks. “Hey, where’s Luffy?”

Me, Nami and Zoro all burst into screams. “GODDAMMIT! Cannot leave him alone for a SECOND—” Nami hollers.

“Fuck this! We’re going!” Zoro snaps, dropping me right back out of the tree. I smack hard onto the ground before he’s hauling me to my feet after jumping after me. “We make for the mansion! Luffy may be being stupid as *fuck,* but he’ll at the very least thin out the crowd for us to get through!”

Chopper and Nami drop down beside us. I snatch my spyglass from Chopper’s hooves and start scanning the nearby buildings before I spot what I’m looking for. I jab Zoro in the chest with it until he looks through, then I point him where I’m looking.

“How the actual fuck—”

Luffy is wedged between two buildings. Like an idiot.

“Give him a couple minutes..?” I hedge. We all watch him wiggle. “I think he’s got this.”

“We don’t have time for this!” Zoro yells into the sky. “Fuck! Ok, Chopper you go get him. We’ll have to use their distraction for ourselves. I’ll get you two in the door, you get to Iceberg and pray Luffy will have caught up by then. If he hasn’t… I don’t know. Run for your lives.”

“You got it! Go team!” I shout, grabbing Nami by the hand and sprinting for the wall. “We’re going around back to Iceberg’s room!”

Zoro sprints right past us, nearly hits me in the face handing my spyglass back, jumps the fence and goes in swinging. There’s loud sounds of violence on the other side and me and Nami exchange looks.

“If he’s killing shipwrights I’m gonna feel really bad,” she mutters.

“He’s smart enough not to. Probably,” I answer, running around the wall towards where me and Luffy exited the building earlier today. I point the illuminated window out to Nami. “We gotta get in there!”

She tugs me towards a building. “Then let’s go up! We can jump it or something!” she says uncertainly. It’s way too far a jump for us. I snatch the top off a barrel as we pass it, then we’re climbing the fire escape of the building. Once we’re on the roof Nami looks even more trepidatious. “I don’t know how we’re gonna get over there…” she murmurs.

I put down the barrel lid at the edge of the roof and pull her in by the waist. “Hold on tight, no promises this won’t kill us,” I announce, unholstering my gun and flicking the impact dial. She squeaks and wraps her arms around my shoulders so tight it hurts. “Excelsior!”

So it hurts. Obviously. It sends the pair of us careening off into the open air, screaming our heads off, in what I can only call a frankly idiodic display of bravery. By some blessing of the divine, we’re rocketing right for the correct window.

I twist us midair to take the brunt of our landing on my back, and we crash right through the glass. We roll a couple times, and come to a stop right beside Iceberg with my gun already up and pointed at Robin.

“Evening, baby. You miss us?”

The room remains in stunned silence for a second. The four guns Robin is holding (two extra arms, if it works it works) all almost automatically shift away from me and Nami. Speaking of, Nami uncurls from where she was hiding in my chest and looks around.

Iceberg is slumped up against the side of the bed, blood gushing out a bullet hole in his shoulder, with the gun he was holding dipped down as he stares at us in blatant shock.

"Apologies for the late drop in. I know it's after your business hours, but we did have an appointment," I quip, keeping my eyes focused solely on Robin.

Nami smacks me in the shoulder. "That was the stupidest thing you've done today! We could have died!" she shrieks.

"Nami! You're ruining my cool entrance!" I whine.

"What the hell are you two doing here?!" Iceberg yells.

"I told you we'd be back, and I don't lie unless I want to," I answer. Robin's eyes are ping-ponging back and forth between all of us like she has no idea what to do. "Hey, Robin. You done acting stupid yet?"

She startles hard when I say her name. "You shouldn't have come here," she whispers.

"'Shouldn't have come here' my ass! Someone needs to stop you from acting like a…" Nami pauses to search for a word, "a huge dumb dumb!"

Wow. Mature language, she's *serious*.

Robin's eyes flash. "You need to leave. Both of you need to get out of here *now—"*

A ringing echoes through the room and Robin's face goes stark white. Three of the guns clatter to the floor as her extra limbs dissipate and one of her real hands flies to her side where a baby Transponder waits.

"It's me," a voice says through it. Fnaf ass motherfucker. "There's been a hitch in the plan. All members report to the bedroom at once. Whatever you do, don't shoot Iceberg yet." It goes back to sleep with a solemn click.

Robin stares us down with blank but terrified eyes. "Leave. *Now."*

"No," I hiss back. Then I wrap my arm back around Nami's waist and continue rolling until we're past Iceberg under the bed. "But pretend we aren't here." Thank god it's so spacious under here.

"What the fuck…" Iceberg mutters under his breath. The room descends into tense silence, the ticking of a clock the only sound disrupting it. The arrival of CP9 is heralded not by the opening of a door, or approaching footsteps, but by a solitary click of a heel on tile.

Nami, who had been tense already, tenses up so fast I swear in the silence I can hear her bones creak. I slap my hand over her mouth before she can make a sound and give away our position. I flash through hand signs in rapid succession.

Lay low. Listen. Wait Luffy.

Her hands shake as she makes the received sign, then does two of her own.

Wait Zoro?

I have no fucking idea where he is. I make the wait sign again.

"Go home! There's nothing to hand over!" Iceberg suddenly yells.

“Then we have a problem,” someone replies, their voice ever so slightly muffled. The sound of flapping wings and hoots make me and Nami exchange confused looks. “What should I say first to a dying man?” There’s some shuffling noises and the voice comes through much clearer. “You disappoint me.”

“Lucci?!” Iceberg gasps. Nami sends me an incredibly alarmed look.

“You’re the one in the wrong,” another man's voice pipes up. “None of this would have happened if you handed them over when the government asked nicely.”

“Kaku?!” And the alarm is growing.

“We wanted to leave town without hurting you, if we could,” Kalifa’s voice rings out.

“Kalifa?!” This really can only get so much worse.

“Did you also get your stubborn streak from your master?” a third man's voice huffs.

“Blueno? From the bar?!” Iceberg breathes out. “You were all working for the government?!”

“Correct. For us, infiltration is the easiest thing in the world. But you just had to go and make things difficult!” Lucci sighs. “Where are the blueprints for the ancient weapon Pluton? Tell us now before more innocent people are harmed.”

The window — which I’m suddenly realizing we left shattered all over the floor — frame rattles against the wall from the high winds. Nami is repeatedly doing the don’t understand sign and I’m thinking we need to make a what the actual fuck sign.

“We’ve been undercover for four years. Don’t worry, we took our regular jobs very seriously,” Lucci continues. “I understand you’re dejected, but the time we can devote to these matters has come to an end.”

The bed runner shifts and Iceberg’s shadow disappears as he moves away from the bed. Nami’s hand clamps down on my own and her face is looking awful queasy. She repeatedly taps the danger sign into her temple.

“We will achieve our goals by any means necessary. If you’re fighting just to fight, I suggest you give it up now. You’ve heard the name Cipher Pol. CP1 through CP8 are the government's top intelligence agencies, stationed in eight bases around the world. They seek out information anywhere, all on the government's orders,” Lucci explains.

“Yes I know of them… But only up to CP8,” Iceberg responds, sounding more breathless by the second.

“Of course. And yet, we are CP9. The ninth Cipher Pol, which shouldn’t exist. Because of a certain privilege, we cannot operate out in the open. Even though that privilege serves justice,” he says haughtily. “If civilians aren’t cooperating with the government, we are allowed… to execute them.”

What a giant bag of dicks, bragging about his licence to kill to a man he believes will be dead in a matter of minutes. Just… what an asshole. And his ass isn’t even mentioning CP0, what a massive loser.

“That’s egotistical! As if a just killing is even possible!” Iceberg hisses.

Lucci scoffs. “Well, some people in power have changed their priorities. Rather than continue to live in fear of the weapon‘s reactivation… We should activate the weapon and put an end to this era of voyages! We should use this weapon as a force for justice!” Dear lord, this guy is deluded. “And yet you would stand in our way? Even now, people the world over are being victimized by pirates, and you’re saying you won’t help them?”

“This conversation is pointless! The world will fight for control over that power and the damage will only be greater!” Iceberg snaps.

“You seem to distrust the government… Mayor Iceberg,” Lucci observes.

“I just know human nature… boy,” Iceberg seethes. Goddamn. Ate his ass up.

The effect is kinda ruined by the loud crash and thump indicating Iceberg just got his face kicked in. Nami jumps and barely manages to cover her mouth before a squeak breaks out.

“Watch your tongue. You’re not my boss anymore,” Lucci scolds. “Kaku, check his pulse.” We watch the shadow of Kaku crouch down beside the shadow of Iceberg. “Before we get into our actual business and our theory, I’d like to confirm something else.”

That doesn’t seem good.

“Considering the hurricane level winds out there, I’d be remiss to not notice the gaping hole where once was a window. Given the glass all over the floor, it’s reasonable to assume something came crashing *in* as opposed to you making some misguided attempt at escape,” Lucci drawls.

Me and Nami slowly turn to each other and sign danger in unison.

“Your pulse picked up. Wonder what that means,” Kaku murmurs, uncomfortably close to our hiding place.

Please, god, for the love of all things good let Luffy get here soon. Zoro, Chopper, ***Usopp, anyone—***

Lucci continues. “I have to ask, has anyone else happened through this room while we’ve been gone? Well, Nico Robin?”

Fuck. Nami clamps both of her hands tight over her mouth and squeezes her eyes shut, a couple tears smearing down her face.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Robin says, not a single spec of inflection to her voice. "It has only been the mayor and I since Blueno left me in here."

"And I'm sure you understand why I don't believe you," Lucci replies coldly. "Now in a room like this, there's so few places to hide. I wonder…"

My breath hitches. I stare up into the wooden baseboard of the mattress frame and pray.

"Kalifa," Lucci barks, a single word command.

That whisper I heard what feels like a lifetime ago in the galley with roast melting on my tongue *screams* through my head and I jerk it to the side. The wooden baseboard above where my eyes were splinters as a bullet of air smashes through it and leaves a smoking dent in the floor in between Nami and I's faces.

We both stare at it for a second in complete horror. I silently decide we need a we're fucked sign.

"Was there a point in you destroying my bed?" Iceberg asks around a cough, his voice shaky and I can only imagine the things this night is doing to his blood pressure.

There's the distinct sound of bones creaking in ways they very much shouldn't and Iceberg's wet gaspy sound as I assume Kaku twists his arm. "Tone," he berates.

There's no scream to warn me this time, just a second hole blowing through the baseboard between my legs. I silently thank god for making me a habitual manspreader and not gracing me with a dick to get shot off.

Another shot hits on the other side of Nami and she jerks closer to me, more tears spilling over her cheeks. I tap her on the arm and her eyes flash open. I do the wait sign again, then gesture to my feet and do the hit me motion. Her eyebrows furrow and I do her sign then the lay low sign.

I spin around as quietly as I can so my shoes are facing Nami. I mouth *kick me* to her and slip both of my pistols into my hands. Her feet are shaking where her heels press into mine and I take a deep breath as another shot blasts into the floor by my head.

I give Nami a reassuring smile and she nods her head, bangs plastered to her forehead by sweat. She pulls back her feet then slams them into mine, sending me sliding across the floor and out from under the bed.

A few things happen in rapid succession.

The abruptness of my entrance is completely overshadowed by Luffy crashing into the room by absolutely destroying the wall behind me, chunks of rock flying everywhere with a scream of, “WHERE’S ROBIN?!”

At the same time, Zoro busts in by slicing the doors to ribbons. “Luffy?!” he shouts, looking as confused as I feel.

“Luffy!” Robin yells.

Relief crashes through me like a wave “Luffy!” I cry. Even with all the distraction going on in the room, neither of my shots find homes in any of the CP9 agents. Sons of bitches.

Lucci simply leans out of the way of my bullets and glowers at all of us. “...Meddlers,” he mutters.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY NEW YEARS GUYS HERE'S A NICE CLIFFHANGER!

I used to have the whole fic separated between two docs, one for stuff I've published and one for stuff not, but apparently google docs has a word cap so I had to spend half an hour splitting the entire thing up between the arcs so I can actually open the files lmao. Anyways I've written way over 300k now so that's exciting.

Chapter 72: Chapter Seventy Two: Tú Te Vas Y Yo Me Quedo Aquí

Chapter Summary

La Gata Bajo La Lluvia - Rocío Dúrcal

“Don’t ask me, this is the first I’ve seen of the asshole. And may I just say, godawful first impression,” I grumble.

Chapter Notes

Today's song brought to you by the recommendation a lovely reader. (And it's a certified banger like holy shit—)

I am a Paulie simp first, writer second.

Lets take a second to pray for my soul because I restart school next week and I didn't even get into bed until 5 last night. Like dude I'm fucked.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Took you guys long enough!” I snap, rolling up onto one knee at my Captain’s side with both my guns still firmly aimed at the assassins in the room.

Paulie (covered in blood and yet looking incredibly sexy, like GODDAMN) is behind Luffy, and Chopper (in his reindeer form, for some reason) is behind Zoro.

“I was very punctual, fuck you!” Zoro snaps back. “Luffy, where the fuck have you been?! You left Chopper behind!”

“Robin, I'm so happy to see you again!” Chopper himself wails, not seeming to mind.

“Robin! I finally found you!” Luffy shouts, somewhere between furious and relieved.

“Well, well, well…” Lucci mutters.

“You, Strawhat… Paulie!” Iceberg huffs, somehow managing to look worse than when I went under the bed.

“Mr. Iceberg?! What… What on earth is going on here?!” Paulie demands, voice cracking as he takes in the scene. Wait a fucking minute — was the fucking *Gajeel?* There really is no escaping Fairy Tail…

“Paulie, you idiot, why didn’t you run?!” Iceberg demands hoarsely.

“What is going on here?!” Paulie repeats, eyes flashing across CP9 in abject horror. “It almost looks like you guys are the ones trying to assassinate him! Why are you dressed like that?!”

Valid question. Those masks and robes could not have been the most practical choice they had.

“Hey! Kalifa, Blueno, Kaku, Lucci! This must be some kind of sick joke!” he continues shouting.

“Yeah, aren’t these the shipwright guys?! That’s pigeon guy! Right?” Luffy asks, eyes darting to Paulie and I.

“Don’t ask me, this is the first I’ve seen of the asshole. And may I just say, godawful first impression,” I grumble.

“Now that you mention it, I recognize that square nose guy,” Zoro pipes up from the chopped up door.

“Paulie, the truth is we work for government intelligence. If we apologize, you’ll forgive us, won’t you?” Lucci intones, voice flat. “All those days we spent together, building ships from dawn till dusk. We’ve been comrades. I know this is sudden and you may have trouble believing it, so should I smash Iceberg’s face in to prove it?”

“He already did that, for the record,” I mutter.

“Quit messing with me! That’s enough!” Paulie yells, huffing breath like he can’t keep it in. “The fucking voice under the bull mask was yours! All this time you could talk just fine! I’ll teach you to make fun of me!”

“Paulie, stop!” Iceberg pleads.

As Paulie goes lunging past me for Lucci, a rope full of fucking knifes shooting out, I stick my free leg out and trip him.

“THE FUCK—” he yelps.

The Finger Pistol Lucci was aiming for Paulie misses him as he crashes down. “Are you stupid?!” I yell. “You wanna head to head the top bitch of CP9 knowing fuck all about him?!”

“Butt out! I don’t know who the fuck you are, but this doesn’t concern you!” Paulie snaps, pushing himself up on his elbows.

“I don’t care how gorgeous you are, don’t talk about my butt unless you’re complimenting me!” I snap back.

Paulie’s face lights up red. “EXCUSE ME?! You indecent… uh, green haired person!” he shrieks.

“You get the privilege of calling me indecent after, and only *after,* you’ve seen me half naked!” I declare. “Can we skip the crap of you explain the Six Powers and your ridiculous high and mighty schtick? I’d like to actually get some decent sleep since I apparently drank myself in a stupor last night.”

Lucci regards me in the way one would regard a worm. It’s truly a wonderful Eneru impression, all things considered. “Would you mind, kindly, shutting up?

“Back up! What’s a CP9, and what’s a Six Powers?!” Paulie demands, scraping across the ground as Luffy drags him back towards us by the leg. “And stop dragging me around!”

“What are you doing, Strawhat?” Lucci asks, sounding more exasperated than actually curious.

“You’re trying to kill this guy, right?! What about building ships together?!” Luffy responds, looking incredibly pissed as Paulie hacks up a glob of blood beside me. I grimace and silently curse god for making this man attractive even in this state. It’s just not fair.

“That was only until now. Things have changed,” Lucci shoots back, face and voice both cold.

“So you’re really a traitor then?! Fine! All I know is I promised this guy we’d trash whoever was trying to kill Ice guy!” Luffy yells, jerking his head at Paulie.

“Why are you taking Paulie’s side?” Kaku asks.

“Because I have business with you too!” he snarls, then redirects his attention to the most important person in the room. “Hey Robin! What gives?! Why are you with *these* guys?! If you want to leave us, tell me why!”

“You oughta know we have a severance policy! And defecting to schmooze with World Government cronies is non-permissible!” I add. This dumb fucking standoff is going to last

forever. “Stop acting like a dumbass!”

“You people don’t listen very well, do you?” Well she already knew that, no need to say it out loud. “I told the cook and the doctor I was leaving. Didn’t they tell you?”

“We told them! But I still don’t get it! Why, Robin?!” Chopper cries out.

“To make my wish come true!” Robin declares snappily. “If I stay with you people… that wish will never come true! To accomplish my goal I’ll make any sacrifice!”

“That’s bullshit and you know it!” I shout. “These jackasses won’t help you with anything, you *know* that!”

“Don’t lecture me about what I do and don’t know!” she snaps, glaring at me. Her eyes are cold and send a shiver down my spine. I think that’s the first time she’s ever raised her voice at me. “It’s not your place to speak on another’s behalf!”

I flinch back. It’s a slap in the face, having my own words thrown back at me.

“So that’s it then? You’ll betray your friends and frame them for murder? What goal is worth that?” Zoro pipes us.

“I don’t need to tell you that,” she spits.

“That woman! She’s not sane!” Iceberg rasps into the ground. “Are you crazy, Nico Robin?! Do you understand what you’re trying to do?!”

“Clearly fucking not,” I hiss under my breath.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, Iceberg,” Robin says, turning that glare on him and throwing an arm out. “Now be quiet!” Iceberg gasps and yells out in pain as Robin’s limbs grow from the ground and twist his own around. Paulie calls out his name again and Robin sweeps furious eyes over the room. “Stay out of my way!”

“Hey! What are you doing?! Are you serious?!” Luffy demands.

“Robin, what’s happened to you?! Are you really our enemy now?!” Chopper wails.

“You’re suppose to be the smart one, where do you get off acting like a total and utter fucking *idiot?!”* I all but growl. This is so fucking infuriating.

“Sorry to break up this touching reunion, but there’s a person of importance we have to go get,” Lucci interrupts, flashing Iceberg a smug look. “I’m sure you know who I mean. We’re in a bit of a hurry, there’s no more business in this mansion for us. And absolutely no more use for you.” Iceberg goes completely white in the face and Lucci tilts his head to the side. “Kalifa, how much time do we have?”

Kalifa pushes up her glasses and glances at a pocket watch. “Two minutes.”

Lucci turns back to us. “This is a bit sudden, but in two minutes this mansion is going up in flames.”

All of our jaws drop. “HEH?!” I screech.

I FORGOT THEY BOMBED THIS PLACE.

“WHAT?!” Luffy screams.

“Fire is such an effective method for erasing all sorts of evidence. If you’d rather not burn to death, I’d suggest leaving the mansion,” Lucci recommends, taking a step back and falling

into formation with the rest of CP9. “That is… if you can get past us.”

Zoro, who’s had his hands on the handles of his swords since he sheathed them, pulls them out of their scabbards. “Looks like they plan to get rid of us. And our ‘friend’ Nico Robin has made it clear whose side she’s on. *Now* do you two get that she’s left the ship?”

I take a deep breath and steady my hands. “I DON’T BUY IT!” me and Luffy shout in unison.

Lucci just rolls his eyes. “Pretty soon this building will start burning from the first floor up and kill everyone inside.” His eyes gleam as he stares down his nose at us. “The culprits are *pirates* after all. These things do happen,” he says with false pity.

“You monsters…” Paulie grits, wiping blood out of his eyes.

“You guys captial S *Suck,”* I seethe. “And don’t get me started on your methods. For the love god, who trained you buffoons? What kind of assassins create the kind of distraction you did? Let alone *burn a building to hide evidence?* You’re supposed to be *sneaky!* You’ve not supposed to leave evidence in the first place!”

A couple of them glance at each other out of the corners of their eyes. “...It’s not like you had great reputations to begin with. This won’t be much of a blow or inconvenience for you,” Blueno says flatly.

Robin suddenly spins on her heel. “I’ll leave first then.”

Lucci doesn’t bother looking at her. “Right. You’ve fulfilled your role. Good work.”

“Wait! Robin, I won't let you leave us like this!” Luffy shouts desperately.

“Robin! You know I know damn well what your goal is, which is why I know what you're trying is ludicrous! You have to know these fuckers won’t keep their word! Not for you, and not for us!” I yell.

She pulls her hood over her head, not looking back at us. “This is farewell.”

“Robin!” Chopper cries.

“Don’t let her leave!” Iceberg calls hoarsely. This poor man’s throat. “Don’t let Nico Robin leave!”

Luffy runs right at the group. “We only just found you! You can’t leave yet!” Blueno slides into place in front of him. “Outta my way!” Luffy shouts, going in for a kick. His sandal slams into his face with absolutely no effect. “The fuck?!”

Blueno smirks. “The training your friend bashed has tempered our bodies into being as tough as iron shells.”

“I don’t care! Move it!” Luffy growls, sending out a barrage of punches that Blueno effortlessly slips around. “Robin! Wait!” he calls over as she continues her walk to the destroyed window.

Fucking damnit, I always screw this shit up right when it matters.

“Fuck it!” I holler, taking off and skirting wide around Luffy’s fight.

I’m immediately accosted by both Kaku and Kalifa coming at me with legs raised. I drop down into a knee slide under Kalifa, and Zoro appears out of fucking nowhere to intercept Kaku. He blocks Zoro’s sword strike with a pair of chisels, and I rise smoothly out of the slide without a second of wasted momentum.

“ROBIN!” I scream. “I’M NOT LETTING YOU DO THIS!”

Robin pauses and half turns her head, and my heart jumps a little at the look of utter despair in her eye. In that second of distraction, Lucci appears in front of me and punches me hard across the face.

My head spins as I stagger to the side, blood flooding my mouth. I can’t be entirely certain I didn’t lose a tooth as he immediately follows it up by kicking me in the side and sending me sprawling ass over teakettle. I scramble up to my feet through the pain and try to point my guns at him.

He reaches me in a flash, no hesitation as he plants a palm into my chest. Time stretches for a long second as he scoffs lightly, then the force from his palm sends me flying. I sail halfway across the room, only stopping when I crash through the closet doors and get all but buried under a pile of shirts and blazers as the rod they were all hanging on snaps and drops everything on me.

I let out this strangled yelp thing that’s muffled under the pile of clothing as I curl into myself. That fucking HURT. I throw everything off and basically fall over myself getting out of the destroyed closet, stray ties and shirts catching in my step, just in time to watch Zoro get fucking wasted by a Finger Pistol.

I choke on a scream and scramble forward. “Zoro!”

Lucci now has Luffy by the face and Robin has disappeared out the window. I’m starting to think making things better just isn’t in my nature. Lucci effortlessly throws Luffy across the room directly into a wall.

“What… are you people?” Paulie demands shakily.

“We’re far beyond ordinary humans! We’ve trained for as long as we can remember, honing ourselves past the limits of the human body in service to the World Government. We gained six superhuman skills through that training; the Six Powers,” Lucci explains. “You must be

painfully aware of the difference in combat power between us, the World Government's most elite fighting force, and you… a mere band of pirates."

These jackasses really think too highly of themselves. My everything is really starting to hurt. "So you're tools in more ways than one, huh?" I wheeze, pushing myself up off my knees. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on." I run my tongue across my teeth and silently rejoice that none of them are missing.

"Lucci, the detonators are about to go off," Kalifa pipes up.

"Right," Lucci sighs. "A chance like this may not come again. Why don't I show you something interesting as this draws to an end?"

And then he begins to change. There's these subtle kricks and cracks as he grows, his suit shifting to accommodate him. In a mostly smooth and entirely horrifying transformation, Lucci goes from a hot kind-of-a-twink into a giant fucking cat monster.

"Ok what the fuck."

"What the hell are you?!" Paulie screeches, voice strangled.

Chopper's jaw drops and he simply starts screaming. I don't blame him in the slightest.

"Sounds like the fires have started," Lucci comments through a mouth full of sharp teeth.

I pause for a second to listen. Shit, my head was ringing too much to even notice shit had started going to hell. Well — more hell that it's already gone to.

"What kinda Devil Fruit is that?!" Luffy coughs out, getting up from the rubble littered crater he left in the wall.

“The Cat Cat Fruit: Model Leopard,” Lucci drawls, towering over all of us with his absolutely stupid looking face.

“I’m a cat person but this is fucking ridiculous,” I mutter under my breath.

“I don’t like it, *I do not like it—”* Chopper gargles.

“Zoan. Logia. Paramythia,” Lucci starts, his voice coming out rumbly like a pur, but like in the scariest way possible. “While there are many unique abilities, the staple of Zoan types is the strengthening of your own physical capabilities. The more you train, the more your power is amplified. For aggressive attacks, Zoan’s are the strongest!”

“His body is insane!” Paulie hisses. I violently stifle the urge to snort.

Kalifa’s head suddenly jerks up. “Lucci, the workers are coming up!”

Lucci just barely inclines his head. “Oh, don’t worry. They’ll never make it this far.” Then his leg flings out.

There’s a split second where the cracking of the stone wall behind me doesn’t even register. Then I’m spinning hard on my heel. “Chopper, Paulie, *run!”* I scream hoarsely.

They listen. Paulie goes right for Iceberg, and Chopper goes right for me. I hold my arms out and he, in the smoothest transformation I have ever seen — it truly makes Lucci’s look childish in comparison — shifts into his smaller form and bashes right into my chest.

I drop my guns without hesitation to grab onto him, spinning back for more momentum, and flingling him like a bag of flour right out the window I crashed through earlier. Speaking of crashing, the fucking wall comes down. I barely manage to roll out of the way of a giant piece of rubble, grabbing my pistols on the way, and smashing my shoulder into a bedpost.

Oh fuck, Nami is still under there!

"Stop this, Paulie," Blueno says suddenly. I glance up to see the whole force of CP9 staring down Paulie, a bloody Iceberg slung over his shoulders.

"Even after all you've done…" Paulie hisses, "deep down I still feel like we're comrades!" He sounds close to tears and his voice is cracky, the poor fucker.

Lucci just rears back a claw with no remorse. "The feeling isn't mutual."

Luffy springs in completely outta left field, socking Lucci across his dumb furred face with a loud and satisfying crack.

"Strawhat!" Paulie yelps.

I see Lucci's claw go back again, this time just one finger outstretched and I know immediately what's about to happen. I don't throw myself in front of him, I don't fire my gun in some attempt to dissuade him, I just stare with wide eyes as Lucci spears his finger right through Luffy's stomach.

Luffy staggers on his feet for a second. My voice catches in my throat like it wants to choke me. I hear Zoro scream out Luffy's name. Lucci, the actual fucking psychopath, licks my Captain's blood off his finger, then grabs him by the head.

"I'll send you on a one way flight…" he rumbles, lifting him off the ground and rearing his arm back, "...RIGHT OFF THE ISLAND!"

And he throws my Captain through the wall.

“Why you — !” Zoro howls, lunging on Lucci with his sword without hesitation. His strike is stopped cold by Lucci’s forearm, and he whirls around and kicks Zoro right out of the roof so fast my head spins.

I jerk up onto my knees with both my guns raised and let out this furious and anguished scream that hurts my throat and don’t stop until I’ve fired a full round of shots from my guns and both chambers are dead empty.

Every *single* ***goddamn bullet*** bounces off his Iron Body and it’s with blurry eyes and stinging cheeks that I decide he is thus irredeemable.

“Unfortunate and pathetic,” he rumbles, spitting one of the bullets that found a home in his mouth out off to the side.

Unfortunately and rather pathetically, I think he’s right. I slump back onto my haunches and holster my guns as he advances on me. I keep my eyes high and defiant as he stands above me, not even bothering to hunch to make eye contact easier for himself.

“Leave them tied up here with the other two. They’ll all burn with this building,” he commands, not hiding the shine in his eye that belies his love of the violence.

Then his heel comes down fast on my head and I’m out like a light.

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“—d, Ed please please *please* wake up I can’t do this without you pulling your weight—”

I notice the searing warmth before Nami’s voice. I let out a small wordless groan, trying to steady the spinning of my head before I open my eyes. I try to bring my hands up to hold my head before realizing I can’t move them.

My eyes feel like they weigh a gazillion pounds as I flutter them open. “Nami..?” I murmur, closing my eyes back shut against the bright orange of the room. Why is it bright orange..?

“Ed!” Nami whines, pure relief in her voice. “I’m gonna untie you, so you gotta help me, yeah?”

The thing restraining my arms, rope apparently, goes slack and I blink my eyes back open. “Oh,” I mumble, “the room’s on fire.” That’ll explain why it's so hot and orange. Huh.

“Stop spacing out!” Nami begs. “We’re going to die if you don’t help me!”

I blink harshly, once, twice. I glance around. The room is partially collapsing, and I’m propped up against both Paulie and Iceberg, both of whom are passed out and covered in blood. Nami is getting the last of the ropes off Paulie, and trying to push Iceberg into my arms.

Kitetsu is on the ground beside her and there’s tears streaming down her face. That, more than anything, snaps me into reality.

Fuck. *Fuck.* Ok, we’re in a burning building and we need to get out. We need to escape a burning building and my muscles all feel like jelly.

I grab the pills Chopper left on my nightstand forever ago from my pocket and dry swallow them, not super helpful for the immediate future, but they’ll sure help in a bit. I snatch Zoro’s sword up off the ground and haul Iceberg up like a koala, ignoring the agony, and look back to Nami.

She’s holding up Paulie as best she can, but to be honest she’s seen better days. Her cheeks are smeared in soot and tears, and her skin has taken on a tight shiny look. She coughs harshly into Paulie’s jacket, then starts scrambling for the window we entered from.

She leans out over the edge and turns back to me in unadulterated fear.

“I’ll go first. I’ll catch you. Nami I swear to god I’ll catch you,” I promise, walking halfway to join her. She gives me a panicked look and I shake my head. “From the bottom of my heart, I’ll always catch you.”

She takes a deep breath that catches and throws her into a round of coughing. I curse under my breath and shove Kitetsu in my mouth. Dear god, how the fuck does Zoro do this? He better not get pissy about me slobbering all over his precious cursed sword. This thing better not curse *me.*

I take one step, then another, then break into a full on sprint. I jump up onto the ledge of the window, kick myself off, and jump out. Oh shit, this is so much higher than I thought it was. I careen towards the ground and clutch Iceberg close to my chest. The people of this town will never fucking forgive us if I splatter their beloved mayor across the ground like so much paste.

My feet slam hard into the ground. My knees, bent, buckle and I’m mostly just thankful my shins didn't come out of my knees. I skid a good couple feet before I start collapsing. Honestly, for doing the stunt with a full grown man in my arms, I’m pretty damn proud.

Once I finally come to a stop, right in front of a whole crowd of people mind you, I drop Iceberg and stab Kitetsu into the ground. “Help him,” I rasp, rising back up on sore legs to go sprinting back towards the house. “NAMI!” I scream, throat absolutely fucking raw. “JUMP!”

I see Nami up in the window. The fire is getting so much fucking worse and I worry for a second she won’t make it. Then she’s plummeting towards me in a wobbly line, the weight of her passenger throwing off her trajectory. I run towards her with my arms outstretched as she gets closer and closer, then finally she crashes into my arms.

Predictably, it flattens me and sends all three of us sprawling across the ground. I stay there groaning for a long moment as Nami rolls off me. There’s the steady thump of running against the ground all around me and I feel my eyes flutter involuntarily shut.

“I’ll be back in a few, save me a biscuit,” I mumble, blindly smacking out at Nami.

“Yeah, yeah sure. A biscuit, sure,” she groans back. I take that as permission and promptly pass out.

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I come to with talking around me and fingers in my hair. To be perfectly honest, I’m getting quite tired of passing out. It sucks. It takes a second, a long second, for me to get my wits about me and figure out what’s going on.

Iceberg is talking to Nami, who’s got my head in her lap. “Can you believe it?” I hear Iceberg say. “Out of everyone living on this planet, that woman chose to protect the seven of you.” Nami’s fingers stop on my head. “I know it’s likely the blueprints will be stolen now. I can’t really blame her, but…”

Nami collapses forward on me. I jerk my eyes open and my hands fly up to her shoulder as she huffs a breathless laugh.

“Hey! What’s wrong?!” Iceberg asks panickedly.

“I’m so happy,” Nami cries shakily. “Robin… she didn’t betray us!”

I pat her on the shoulders. “Told ya so,” I mumble.

Nami flashes back upright and blinks down at me, then bursts into tears. “Ed! Robin didn’t betray us!” she wails, going right back into collapsing on me in a hug.

I groan in semi-pain but hug her back anyways. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ve been saying that. Love makes people stupid as hell.” She drops me in a second and gets up then bolts into a dead sprint away from me. “Wha — NAMI! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!” I yell after her.

“I gotta go get everyone else! We gotta tell them!” she yells back.

“Wait! The Strawhats are defeated! What can you do now?” Iceberg calls.

“Now?” Nami repeats incredulously, pausing and half turning back. “This *starts* now! That didn't take out our boys! We’re going to go get Robin! Hesitating makes us weak!” She flashes a big determined smile. “Now that we know she needs to be saved, our strength will be limitless!”

Iceberg watches her, mouth agape, as she sprints to where Chopper is sitting on the ground passed out and starts trying to wake him up. “Is… is she serious?” he breathes at me.

I stare after her with a proud smile. “Yeah. Of course she is. It’ll take nothing short of the end of the world itself to make us give up, and even that’s debatable. She’ll gather us up, our Captain will get us on track, and then we’ll take our archeologist back.”

He stares at me like I’m something completely foreign. Like he has no idea what to make of me. It makes me smile wider.

“Now,” I stand up on barely steady feet and turn to him, “I need to get on that train.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys are ready for the unnecessarily long train segment. It, uh, gets long.

FIRST CHAPTER OF THE YEAR AND IT'S JUST ED GETTING THEIR SHIT ROCKED I AM SO TRUE TO MY BRAND!

Chapter 73: Chapter Seventy Three: Did I Build A Ship To Wreck?

Chapter Summary

Ship to Wreck - Florence + the Machine

"What are you, a broken record? Repeating everything I say doesn't mean I'm going to suddenly realize how stupid my decisions are," I snark, struggling immensely to knot my pilfered tie. Is that nerve damage from my hands or brain damage from the concussion?

Chapter Notes

Lmao I have to get up before 6 am tomorrow to make it to my first 8 am class of the term and I need you to know I went to sleep at 4 last night and didn't wake up until minutes before I posted this. I am, as the poets say, *fucked.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What do you mean, get on the train?!" Iceberg yelps, struggling to his feet to follow after me.

"I mean get on the train, what the hell else would it mean?" I shoot back, reloading my guns with a practiced efficiency.

"It's scheduled to leave for government personnel at 11, if you want to get your crew together and on the train by then I'm afraid you might be, pardon my language, *fucked,"* Iceberg stresses.

I spin and holster my guns and send him a flat look. "I'm going ahead by myself. Now unless you have anything you'd like to contribute to my shitty disguise aside from this tie I accidentally stole from your closet, stop distracting me."

“Going ahead by yourself?” Iceberg parrots as we catch up to where Nami and Chopper are rejoicing.

“What are you, a broken record? Repeating everything I say doesn’t mean I’m going to suddenly realize how stupid my decisions are,” I snark, struggling immensely to knot my pilfered tie. Is that nerve damage from my hands or brain damage from the concussion?

Nami appears in front of me and ties it without any trouble at all. “You’ll be fine on your own? I’m not convinced that blow you took didn’t give you brain damage,” she tuts. It’s like she can read my damn mind.

“I’d like to check for haemorrhaging before you go,” Chopper adds, hovering and twitching with nervous energy.

I shake my head. “No time. I gotta swing by the inn to grab my coat then I’m going right to the train. Anyone got a bandana by chance?” I call into the crowd. A couple people look at each other before someone steps forward and hands me a plaid bandana that I tie around my head and tuck all my hair up into.

“Um, about your stuff… we kind of confiscated it? So it’s not in your hotel anymore,” the guy explains awkwardly.

I stare at him blankly for a long moment. “Is it closer than the hotel?” He nods slowly. “Great. I’ve got a Marine jacket stashed in my bag, if you could have somebody bring that here stat I would be ever so grateful.”

The guy glances over at Iceberg who just shrugs at him. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

He blinks. “Ah, yes sir. I’ll be back!” he yells, taking off in a run.

I turn back to Iceberg. “Any shot there’s a Transponder around here? You know, not inside the burning building?”

He glances around at the men with us. “Depends on how far you need this call to go. Someone is bound to have a baby, but unless you’re calling to someone on the island you may be out of luck.”

I hiss a curse. “It’s got to reach the fucking East Blue, so that’s no good. *Fuck,* that would have made this so much easier…”

“I have a Transponder!” someone in the crowd yells. All eyes snap to him as he runs forward, setting down a bag he had over his shoulder and taking the snail out. “I’m the designated comms officer, I can’t guarantee an untappable line, but it will get where you need it to go.”

“Oh I could kiss you,” I cheer, lunging for it and punching in Jonah’s number. There’s a long tense moment of ringing and I get genuinely scared no one is going to answer. I forgot it was the dead middle of night. Then it clicks through. “Oh thank god! Jonah, this is urgent and I need you to get something for me as fast as you possibly can,” I rush out.

“Er — sorry, Jonah isn’t in the office at the moment, he left his Transponder here overnight,” a semi-familiar voice responds awkwardly.

“Fergus? Did you get demoted to the night shift?” I ask incredulously. “SHIT! FUCK! The one time it’s actually urgent!” I groan.

“Oh! You’re the CP agent!” he exclaims. Everyone around me takes a big step back.

I cover up the mic and lean back. “I’m not actually a fucking CP agent you dumbfuck, I’ve been scamming the government for months,” I mutter out the side of my mouth at Iceberg. He gives me a long look before his shoulders relax and he waves to carry on. I uncover the mic and flash a bright smile. “Yeah! That’s me! Hey, do you think you could do me a huge favour?”

The snail smiles back. “Sure thing, you're kind of a legend around here. What can I do for you?”

Time to make an educated guess and pray. I don't actually know anything about how the Marines function or their protocols. "I need the unit identification number for Captain T-Bones squad, if you can get me it."

"Yep, gimme a second," Fergus mumbles. I cannot believe that actually worked. "Uhhhh… 201548. Anything else?"

I… I am amazing.

"Think you could get me an ID number?" I hedge.

He hums. "New? Or for someone specific?"

"New," I reply. This is working so much better than I thought it would. Oh my god I am the smartest person I know.

"Name for the ID?" he murmurs over the sound of papers shuffling.

Best to stick with what works. "Edith."

"Edith… Ok. 549208. Any more I can help with or are you set? This is so fun, I've always wanted a CP agent," he snickers.

I laugh with him. "Perfect. You're perfect, Fergus. That's everything, thank you."

He hums. "Of course, of course. I'll let Jonah know you called."

“Cool beans, bye bye,” I respond, hanging up. “Ok, That should not have worked and frankly I might be in deep shit later but that doesn’t really matter,” I announce.

On that cue, the guy from earlier comes sprinting back, drenched in sweat, with my Marine jacket in tow. “I got it!” he wheezes. “I got it as fast as I could!”

I whoop and jump to my feet, snatching it and throwing it over my shoulders. “Ok, how do I look? Sufficiently disguised?” I ask, doing a little twirl.

Nami reaches over and rubs something off my face. “Yup, perfect. Go do your thing, we’ll be right behind,” she promises, a hope filled smile nearly blinding me.

I give her one right back. “Well get her in no time.” We exchange a solid nod and I take a moment to ruffle the top of Chopper’s head. “You two’ve got this.” Then I turn to Iceberg and hold out my hand. “Thank you, for all your help. See you on the other side,” I tell him genuinely.

He stares at my hand for a moment before shaking it. “I sincerely hope you can get your friend back,” he tells me solemnly.

My smile widens. “Trust me, we will. When Paulie wakes up someone tell him what he did in there was super hot, pun intended. I’m off!”

I give all my friends one last look and nod, then take off away from the still burning building to catch my train.

_____

Getting my ass on a Yagura and absolutely gunning it for the train station is much faster than I anticipated. It helps that the bull I picked drove right off a fucking cliff as a shortcut, heedless of my screaming for it not to.

As soon as my feet hit the pavement of the train station I'm sprinting like my life depends on it. Like *Robin's* life depends on it. I barely make it through the first arch before someone grabs my arm. I nearly scream before I realize it's fucking Sanji of all people.

"Sanji?!" I hiss. "Dude, you scared the shit out of me!" I hear the whistle of the train from further in the station. "Shit! Fuck I gotta go!"

"Ed! Wait, what's your plan? Is that the coat you stole from G8?" he questions, scanning me and eyes lingering on my face. "What happened?"

"Government assassins. Look Sanji, I'm about to walk onto that train pussy first and scam my way through it with the power of my charisma, so I gotta go. If you're getting on, get on with it," I say distractedly, craning my neck to see where the train is at.

He furrows his brows. "I'll pretend I know what you're talking about, good luck my love. I'm going to leave a note for Nami, I'll join you soon."

I give him a smile and hold his cheek for a quick second before sprinting for the train again. There's not one, but two conductors outside, and I go running right for them.

One of them notices me first and does a double take. "Hey! This is authorized personnel only!" he calls.

I come to a skidding halt in front of them and hunch for a second to catch my breath. "Sorry! Lieutenant Edith, ID number 549208, with Captain Ship Cutter T-Bone! I'm running super late, please just tell me which car to go to!" I cry, giving them a desperate look.

They exchange a look. "You get in a fight? Whatever, it's car five, get on quick or it's departing without you!" the second guy advises.

Suckers. Major score for me.

I let my face go lax in relief. “Oh, thank you so much!” Then I go running for the fifth car. I jump up onto the in between thingy and slide open the door. Almost immediately I’m met by two guns trained right on me.

“Pardon me for asking, but who might you be?” a man’s voice calls out, weathered and scratched with age. He almost sounds like a ghost.

I glance further into the car as a man stands up. He has a helmet on, and curly black hair spilling out from under it. His face is kind of a nightmare but he has a cool sword and awesome armour so I’m willing to look past it. The Marine jacket over his shoulders is more of a cape than anything and I rejoice for having found the man I’m looking for.

“Captain T-Bone, sir,” I greet, snapping into a salute. “I apologize for my tardiness, I got delayed.”

He studies me for a long moment. “Excuse my rudeness, but could I have your name, rank, and ID number?” he asks.

Time for ol’ reliable. “Lieutenant Edith, sir. ID number 549208,” I recite. God I’m so smart for getting this. I’m proud of myself. The two Marines with their guns trained on me relax and lower them.

“Welcome, Lieutenant. Forgive the questions, but would you mind terribly giving me your unit identification number?” he continues. Thorough ass motherfucker. At least I’m so fucking prepared because I’m so fucking cool.

“201548,” I respond.

He blinks. “A member of my squad? I don’t recall having a Lieutenant, my apologies.” He dips into something of a bow. Dear lord, this man is a gem. There’s a sudden blare of the train

horn through the air. “Ah, it seems we’re departing early. Please, Lieutenant, come in and close the door,” he invites.

I do just that. I slide into one of the empty seats and wince a little as it jostles my side where I can actively feel a wicked bruise forming. *Fuck* that leopard motherfucker can kick. The train lurches a little and then it’s moving. I take a quick glance out the window and watch the lights of Water 7 get smaller. I wonder if Sanji made it on.

“Lieutenant, would you mind terribly telling me what happened to your face?” Captain T-Bone suddenly asks, crouching beside my seat and tearing a chunk off his Marine jacket and dabbing it onto my temple.

I blink at him then blink at the chunk of his cape as it comes away red with blood, some of it already dry and flaking. “Oh. My apologies, sir, I wasn’t aware I was still bleeding. I simply had a run in with a few scoundrels on my way to the train, it’s why I was so delayed,” I bluff.

He nods his head. He kinda looks like a weird Voldemort, or a fucked up animated Disney snail, but he’s just so fucking nice it’s not even an issue. “I simply must ask though, where have you come from? I assumed I would get some sort of missive or notification if I had an additional person to join me on this trip.”

I nod. “Yes, of course. I’m last minute backup from Marineford, I came in on the train earlier as I had business in the city.” I laugh a little sheepishly. “My Commanding Officer is a little scatterbrained, it’s no surprise he forgot to inform you, if he was even going to.”

He sighs understandingly. “Ah yes, I remember my fair share of… scatterbrained superiors back in the day. I shall not hold it against you.” He offers me the scrap of cape and I take it gratefully, dabbing around my temple the same place he had.

“To be honest I had actually put in to be transferred into your unit forever ago, before my current Commander snatched me up. This is a little like living my dream to be honest,” I lie. The more random facts and shit you pour into conversation the harder it is to keep track of, but I’ve never been one to shy away from realism.

He blinks. “Is that so? I’m truly flattered, Lieutenant. May I ask why?”

I snort. “Captain, your reputation precedes you. Not only your incredible strength and prowess in combat, but the philosophy you approach justice with. Your definition of the word and application of the principle is truly admirable. No man could possibly hope for a better leader,” I answer completely honestly. As far as I’ve seen, he might be the only Marine I’d back without a single doubt in my mind.

He blinks rapidly at me then sniffs and runs a finger under his strangely flat nose. “That is very kind of you to say,” he says, almost sounding like he wants to cry.

There’s a sudden yell or something from the car behind us and we all turn towards the door. Oh *shit* — that was a very familiar voice. I shoot up out of my seat and have already made a step towards the door before I stop. “Er — I’ll go check that out, sir. Make sure nothing untoward is happening,” I tell the Captain.

He nods his head. “If that is what you wish. You there! Why don’t you accompany the Lieutenant,” he orders some random guy. He blinks a couple times before saluting and joining me at the door.

I slide it open and gesture for him to go first. Unfortunately, he’ll have to go. As soon as we step outside, we’re pelted by heavy rainfall and I realize just how rocky the sea has gotten. I slide the door closed behind me and open the second.

The Marine steps through and immediately gasps and tries to turn around, but I’ve already got my pistol out and conk him hard on the back of the head. As he crumples to the ground I make eye contact with Sanji, along with both Usopp and Franky who are just stepping out of bags.

I gently kick the guy into the cabin and shut the door behind us without a word. I very carefully keep my eyes off Usopp and pull Sanji in for a hug. “Yeesh, I was worried you wouldn’t make it on board. What’s the big idea, making so much noise?”

“Wait a fucking minute, you’re a Marine?!” Franky yelps, pointing an accusing finger at me.

Both Sanji and I gasp in offence.

“How dare you say something so foul about my darling Ed!” Sanji exclaims.

“How dare you assume I have the incompetence to be a Marine!” I exclaim right along with him.

“The day Ed joins the Marines is the day hell freezes over,” Usopp mutters. It takes every cell of my body fighting instinct to stop myself from laughing, looking at him, or crying.

There’s a long moment of tense silence across us. “Anyways, what exactly are you doing here, little bro?” Franky cuts in, dispelling the tension with ease.

“I’m here to get Robin, what else?” I answer simply. “Now I’m only supposed to be in here to investigate, so whatever we’re doing we gotta do it fast.”

Sanji gives me a nod. “Of course, my dear.” He selects a Transponder from the wall, then sits down on top of some guy slumped over in a booth and rings in a number. The distinctive click of it connecting sounds. “Nami! Nami, can you hear me?”

“Yeah! Is that you Sanji?” Nami’s voice responds.

“And company,” I sing, leaving over the back of the seats.

“Ed! Fuck, am I glad you’re ok. So you’re both on the train then?” she says, relief clear in her voice. There’s a lot of indistinct yelling in the background and me and Sanji exchange a look.

“Sound’s pretty lively over there. Yeah, we’re on the train,” Sanji responds.

“Yeah it’s… it’s a lot! Now listen up, I’m only giving over the situation once!” Nami announces. “So Robin is totes being blackmailed into going with these motherfuckers to protect us from a fucking Buster Call — Iceberg explained the whole thing. That damn Aokiji guy gave CP9 special permission to activate it just this once. That prick, we shoulda turned him into shaved ice when we had the chance—”

“Ok as lovely as the sentiment is, calm down,” I interrupt. The sound on the other end gets unbearably loud, cheering and screaming alike. “Lord, how dare you party without us? I’m out here dressed as the enemy and you’re having fun,” I complain in jest.

“How do you think I feel? This vehicle isn’t exactly safe, you know,” Nami grumbles. “Luffy! Come here! It’s Sanji and Ed!”

“Luffy!” Sanji and I both cheer.

“Guys!” Luffy cheers back. “How are things there? Where’s Robin?!”

“Robin’s… They still have Robin,” Sanji says haltingly. “We just got the rundown of the situation.”

“As always your incredible First Mate has an incredible plan that’ll probably fall apart within the first five minutes of execution,” I inform him.

“Is that right?” Luffy says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “Go ahead. Tear things up!”

“Luffy don’t be reckless! Make them wait until we catch up!” Zoro’s voice demands. “Cook, you hear me?! There’s some real pieces of shit on that train! Who do you think fucked up Ed’s face?!”

Oh he went right for the big guns, the little fucker.

“Zoro, I’m telling you it’s fine!” Luffy interjects. “If it were you and we tried to stop you, we wouldn’t be able to.”

“Sound’s like you get it. Hey mosshead, you worried about me?” Sanji teases.

“Like I’d be worried about *your ass!”* Zoro squawks back.

“So you’re worried about his *ass* specifically?” I snicker.

“You wait right where you are on that fucking train and I’ll come kill you myself!” Zoro screeches.

“No can do, sweetheart. I’m on a time crunch as is, and I still need to give these lunatics my plan,” I sigh. “We’ll see you soon, I give you all my love and luck.”

“We’ll take the love, but keep that luck for yourself. Sounds like you’re gonna need it,” Nami shoots back.

“The only ones who will need luck tonight is whoever has the misfortune of getting between me and whoever took Robin and marked up my darling Ed’s face,” Sanji snarls. “I’m not gonna hold back!” And then he clutches the receiver so hard it shatters in his hand. “Oh. Oops.”

I pat his head with an amused sigh. “You’re a fucking menace. Alright you shits, here’s the rundown. In the next car, car five, is Captain Ship Cutter T-Bone. I’d really rather avoid a confrontation with him if at all possible, he’s truly a wonderful man.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Sanji asks, not even questioning why I like a Marine. Have I mentioned I love this man?

“We disconnect the cars,” I answer. “The car after this is the dining car, the chef… sucks. He’s lame as hell and kinda weird. If someone wants to kill him I wouldn’t super mind but we could just disconnect him too. Car three has a member of CP9.”

Franky groans. *“God,* they’re gonna be a problem, aren't they?”

I shake my head. “Not necessarily. This guy is the weakest of the bunch, I think a recent addition only to fill ranks. Any of us could probably take him on and win, if we play our cards right. It’s the front two cars we really need to worry about. That’s where Robin and all the real threats are.”

“So you really have it all figured out, huh?” Usopp mutters.

I haven’t looked at him since I first walked into the car. I’m scared of what I’ll do if I do.

“Are you really just going to keep ignoring me?” Usopp snaps bitterly.

I take a deep, deep breath. “As First Mate, I have a duty to uphold the orders and decisions of my Captain,” I say carefully, “but…” I fully turn to him and let the tears rush down my cheeks as I pull him in for a tight hug. “I was really fucking worried about you!”

He freezes for a very long moment, then his fingers dig into my shoulders like meat hooks, like he couldn’t stand it if he was ripped away. “Shut up,” he squeezes out, sounding like he’s about to cry too. “You don’t get to be worried, I’m mad at you.”

“Oh yeah?” I hiss back, holding onto him tighter. “Well I’m fucking pissed with you!”

His grip tightens and his nose pokes into the collar of my jacket. “What the hell do you have to be pissed about?!” he grunts.

“How about one of my best friends in the whole fucking world saying I would make a good replacement for him!” I snap back.

“Ok both of you stop, this isn’t the time or place,” Saanji says quickly, separating us. We both immediately turn away from each other.

“He really undersold this difference of opinion shit,” Franky mutters.

I wipe my face off and glance back at the door. “I’ve probably been gone too long. I’ll start making my way up through the cars from the inside, since I’ve got an alibi and codes and shit. I’ll stop in car three, you guys make your way there from the outside. I’ll leave something on the door of the car to show if I’m inside or not, then you can disconnect the cars,” I explain.

Sanji gives me a nod. “You wanna take the CP agent on, or would you rather one of us do it?”

I think for a second. “I’ll send him up to the roof for you. I’ll take on the guys in the train car, it should just be grunts.”

“Wait, give me a minute, this just hit me at once. Let me get this straight,” Usopp interrupts, “Robin is on this train, is being held captive to save you from *certain death,* and this has all happened in the singlar day where I’ve been gone?!”

Me and Sanji exchange looks. “Well when you say it like that…” I mutter.

“Robin doesn’t know anything about the Merry or your fight. You know what that means, don’t you?” Sanji murmurs. “She sacrificed herself and is going along with this so the seven of us, *including you,* would be safe. She did it for *all* of us.”

Usopp stares down at his feet for a long moment. Then Franky is bursting into tears and strumming a guitar he got from god knows where. “That’s such a great story!” he wails.

“Why are you crying?” Sanji asks incredulously.

“Shaddup! I’m not crying!” Franky cries. “Fuck! What does it mean?! By the world's estimation Nico Robin should be a cruel heartless demon woman, but what is this… this deep love for her comrades?!”

“I know, it’s almost like the government is mostly run by a bunch of bitchass liars,” I say sarcastically.

“Robin’s right ahead of us! Let’s go get her!” Sanji declares.

“All right! I, Franky, master builder of the Franky Family, will lend you a hand, bros!” Franky announces. “For reasons I can’t get into, I’ll be in trouble if Nico Robin is captured by the World Government too! And after hearing that touching human-interest story… Hey! Longnose, where are you going?”

Usopp pauses halfway down the aisle. “I’ll… stay here,” he says quietly. Both me and Sanji freeze. “It’s got nothing to do with me anymore, right? If the World Government has finally become our enemy, I don’t really want to be involved. And you’ll be meeting up with Luffy and the others, right?!” his voice ramps up higher and higher as he continues down the train away from us. “After all that blustering, and I shamed myself like that — how could I possibly go with you?!” He stops right at the door, shoulders shaking. “It’s a shame about Robin, but I have no obligation to save her now!” he hisses, sounding more like he’s trying to convince himself than us. “I quit the crew, remember?! Goodbye.”

Then he’s slamming the door open and shut behind him.

“‘Goodbye?!’ Where the hell does he think he’s going, we’re on a *train!”* Franky complains.

“It’s fine. Leave him alone,” Sanji mutters. “You have to get back, right? We’ll make for train car three. We’ll see you on the other side,” he tells me, kissing the top of my head while I stare at the door Usopp left out.

I take a deep breath. “Yeah. Alright. I’ll see you guys up there.” Then I head back to Captain T-Bone’s car.

As soon as I’m inside the Captain is right there. “That took quite a bit longer than I’d expected. There were no problems, I hope? And where has your escort run off to?” he inquires.

“No problems, sir. My company was pulled into a… well I think it was a boxing match of some sort, with a member of CP6. He said he’d return immediately once he’s done. I’ve been asked to pass a message along to the front cars, I do hope you’ll excuse me,” I lie, face apologetic.

He nods slowly. “Ah, yes. Shall I expect your return before we reach our destination?”

I shrug. “It depends on how the intended recipient of this message chooses to direct me. Ah, however brief, it was really quite lovely to meet you,” I say softly.

Captain T-Bone sniffs. “Yes, of course. It was lovely to have you with us. I do hope your Commanding Officer knows what a truly wonderful subordinate he has.”

Oh. Goddamn I’m honestly touched, what the fuck?

I offer him a salute, then make for the next car.

Chapter End Notes

This is a Ship Cutter T-Bone stan account. Don't @ me.

Catch me making shit up for how the Marines function because I'm too lazy to do research on how it actually works.

Also Ed and Usopp reunion, wasn't that fun? Stay tuned for Sniperking content, coming soon to a store near you.

WHOOOOOO ART FOR ED'S DISGUISE BECAUSE APPARENTLY I REALLY DO HAVE A THING FOR MARINE ED!

Chapter 74: Chapter Seventy Four: Going Off The Rails Of A Crazy Train

Chapter Summary

Crazy Train - Ozzy Osborn

I jolt. “Right! The development that requires your immediate attention!” There’s a soft little knock on the door. I glance behind me to confirm and yep, here we go. “It would seem the back cars have been disconnected, sir.”

Chapter Notes

Lmao guess who accidentally write 5k again. It was me and I didn't even realize until right now.

It's been two days of classes and I already have like three assignments fml. At least my Wednesdays are pretty light? My Tuesdays suck tho.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I open the door and enter and almost immediately there’s a knife lodged in the wall beside my head. “Jesus! Pardon the intrusion!” I shriek, ducking and covering my head with my hands.

“Pardon me! Pardon me! I’m Wanze, mad, pardon me!” the son of a bitch in question sings, rolling about the car on some kind of cart. “What’s up?! Are you hungry?! I’m head chef, so I can make you anything!”

“Er — no. I’m just passing through to get to car three,” I say awkwardly.

He stops rolling to stare at me in dismay. “Not even, like, ramen or something?”

I grimace. “Nope. I gotta go. Pardon the intrusion,” I repeat, shuffling past him and out the door at a speed walk.

Just before entering the next car, I stab the scrap of cloak from T-Bone I’ve been carrying into the door via a bent safety pin I fish out of my pocket. Never hurts to have one on you, unless it pops open and stabs you.

Once the signal is set, I enter the car. This one is populated chiefly by men in black suits and fedoras, lame secret agent types, and one man in a truly ridiculous hat. He doesn’t fill out the plumage nearly as well as Mihawk did.

“Who’re you?” he sneers.

I salute. “Ah, Mr. Nero, sir. Lieutenant Edith. I’ve come with a report.” Fuck, I’m gonna have to draw this out long enough for the boys to disconnect the cars.

“A report?” Nero drawls, fully turning to regard me. He’s a mousy looking dude, more rat-like if I’m being honest, and he looks like he’d sooner skin me than listen to any report I could make up.

“Er — yes,” I say awkwardly. “There’s been a… development.”

He arches an eyebrow. “A development?” he repeats.

“A development,” I echo. I hear something outside the door. “One that requires your immediate attention.”

His stare gets flat. “Is that so. Out with it, you’re wasting both our time.” A couple of the suits shift nervously as he runs a thumb across one of his dellinger pistols.

I hear a muffled curse and some clanking of chains outside the door I cough over. “Of course sir! My apologies!” I say loudly. The clanking stops before resuming quieter.

“Get on with it!” Nero snaps.

I jolt. “Right! The development that requires your immediate attention!” There’s a soft little knock on the door. I glance behind me to confirm and yep, here we go. “It would seem the back cars have been disconnected, sir.”

His eyes bug out. “WHAT?!” He jumps to his feet and pushes past me to throw open the door. As predicted, the rest of the cars are very quickly rolling away behind us. “You couldn’t have said anything sooner?!”

“I think there’s someone on the roof,” I say instead of answering him.

“OH MY GOD YOU’RE *USELESS—”*

Then he’s clamouring up the side of the car.

I look back to the fedora guys. “Y’all wanna check this out? The cars are like — very much gone,” I invite.

A whole swarm of them come over to crane their necks out the door. There’s a yell from up top and a few more agents join them. One guy stumbles from being pushed and nearly falls off the small platform.

I circle around to the back and fire an impact shot into the crowd. There’s a chorus of screaming as a whole fucking bunch of them fall right off the train. The remaining guys turn back to me in incredulous horror and I kick one off the edge. I clothesline another as he goes for his gun, then fire a regular shot into yet another.

There's a lot of petty slapping between me and the last guy at the back before bullets start flying at us from the four guys left in the front of the car. I duck back around the guy I'm slapping at and nearly get pushed off the train for my efforts, but then he's yelping from a bullet hitting his meat shield shoulder and I kick his legs out from under him and toss him into the water.

I fire a few more shots that manage to take out three of the final four (one totally kills one of them and I don't have it in me to feel bad), then go running right for the last guy. I neatly dodge to the side of a point blank bullet in a move that would make the Persona 5 protag proud, then throw myself at him in a tackle.

He screeches and catches me purely on instinct and I kick one of my legs up over his head and start squeezing with my knees. Fucking hell why didn't anyone tell me pulling a Black Widow would be so fucking hard?

He struggles for unnecessarily long before he starts losing his grip and I heave myself up to conk him over the head with my gun. He crumpless to the ground and I smack onto my back, but a win is a win.

I sit there for a second before applause rings from the other side of the car. I turn back to see a very impressed Sanji and Franky, accompanied by the illustrious Sniperking.

"That was beautifully done," Sanji praises.

"Yeah well don't expect that move again anytime soon," I grumble, getting to my feet and rubbing my back. "Y'all pick up a stray while I was gone?"

Sniperking strikes a pose. "I am the famous sniper from Sniper Island, Sniperking! That young man Usopp has asked me to help, and so I shall!"

God the voice is actually kinda funny. It's deeper and more grave than his normal voice, but still familiar enough.

I blink slowly at him twice. I start slowly walking towards him. He starts shifting nervously. “I could never refuse a request from that Usopp fellow, many years of stalwart friendship have formed a bond like no other!”

The mask is a little ridiculous, with the sun like spikes and all.

I continue my walk as he gets more panicked. “Uh, Sniperking—” Sanji mutters, but is interrupted by him continuing his ranting.

He has to know the goggles and his nose are a dead giveaway, right?

“I’m — er — Usopp’s cousin! Twice removed on his fathers side, there was a messy divorce at one point and some real nasty business with a family curse, but—”

I cut him off by pulling him into another hug.

He freezes again. He grabs on again. “You, er, know I’m Sniperking, correct? Haha!” he gargles.

I keep holding on. “Yeah, yeah. Any family of Usopp’s is family of mine. Except Yasopp. I see that motherfucker it’s on sight,” I mumble.

“I’m sorry you want to fight my dad?” he mutters.

“Uncle. Yasopp is your uncle, since Usopp is your cousin,” I correct, trying to stamp down a smile.

“RIGHT,” he yelps.

I sigh into the hood of his cape before pulling back, semi reluctantly on both our parts. I hold out my hand for him to shake and he does so after a moment of hesitation.

“Sniperking.” A pause. “Tell Usopp we love him for me, yeah?”

His hand holds mine so tight I worry about the bandages still wrapped around my porcelain injuries. “Yeah. Yeah I’ll tell him,” he croaks, voice thick.

I give him a meaningful nod and gracefully ignore Franky’s sniffing. “Good. Now then boys, we have a maiden to save.”

“Alright almighty detective, what’s your plan from here?” Sniperking inquires.

I give him a big ol’ smile and clap my hands. “I’m fresh outta ideas! To be perfectly frank, I’m not seeing a whole lot of ways we can win here. We’re not super outnumbered, but with us four we’re a little outclassed. Rob Lucci would probably kill any of us but Luffy.”

Everyone’s face drops. “Er — is he really that good..?” Sanji ventures.

“Let me put it like this. If it was a 1v1 without Lucci I have no doubt our side would win because we have what I like to call ‘plot armour by association’ via our darling Captain, but there’s a non 0 chance they would team up on us. Plus the whole ‘Robin is still a hostage’ situation,” I mutter.

“So are we just fucked then?” Sniperking asks in dismay.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. “Not yet. You’ll be our trump card for now.” He blinks at me. “Think you can get to the front car and retrieve Robin for us?”

Sniperking falters for a moment. “Y — you’d trust me to get Robin..?” he says quietly, voice losing the Sniperking touch. I give him a solid nod and he straightens up. “Of course, master

tactician! I see Usopp did not oversell your talents in the least!"

Aw, that's sweet.

"You can't oversell an underachiever. So you go get Robin, or at least try, be as convincing as you can. Pull out all the stops, as always fake marriage is the back pocket option," I advise.

"I am not using your stupid Fake Marriage Go! code you heathen," Sniperking groans.

"Ah yes, because of course Usopp told you about our code system," I say loudly.

Sniperking jerks into a pose. "YES OF COURSE HE DID!"

"You're fucking hopeless," Sanji mutters under his breath. "So *Sniperking* gets Robin while we, what? Wait?"

"The rest of our reinforcements shouldn't be too far behind us now, waiting to hit them with our full force before we reach the island may be our best option of success," I sigh. Us actually reaching Enies Lobby isn't the worst case scenario, but it is something I'd like to try and avoid.

"If you're not back in ten minutes, we're going in guns blazing," Sanji decides. He holds a hand up when I open my mouth to protest. "They may need a cover to escape or, god forbid, they get caught. We can hold our own against them for at least a bit if it comes to that."

I reluctantly nod along. "It will be hard to have some kinda signal that we could get from here that those psycho's wouldn't also get," I mumble.

"I will not fail you! I shall return with the fair lady or my name isn't Sniperking!" Sniperking announces.

“Just do your best. If you can’t manage to convince her, don’t feel too bad. She’s acting like a real cunt,” I offer. “If you have to force her out the window in a sack we won’t blame you.”

“I’ll blame you. You keep my darling Robin out of a sack at all costs,” Sanji threatens.

Sniperking flashes two thumbs up, then slides open the window and starts climbing out.

“You bros are pretty organized,” Franky praises. “I’ll admit I’m pretty impressed.”

“Don’t hold onto that impression. As soon as our Captain shows up and starts ruining the carefully crafted balance you’ll be singing a different tune,” Sanji grumbles back. The two of them start making their way closer to the front of the car while I take a peek out the back window.

There’s no sign of the Rocketman past the high choppy waves, or the severed cars, and I hope they weren’t loaded up with too much fodder for the crew to wade through. I spare a thought for Captain T-Bone, I feel real shit for abandoning him to the mercy of one Roronoa Zoro.

Regardless, the relentless stir of the ocean behind us is as mesmerizing as it is scary. I remember a family trip to Florida when I was young, ill timed with the tail end of a hurricane warning, and watching the massive waves break against the shore from a beachfront condo. I was still afraid of storms then, and praying something I couldn’t articulate about safety to something I didn’t believe in.

I suppose there’s only one person who I can pray for safety from now, and I stare into the dark past the window in the direction I know he’s charging in from.

It happens so fast.

One second I'm staring out at the water, then Nero's stupid rat face is right in the window, and the next I'm crashing through the doors into the second car.

I roll several times through the aisle, splinters of the wall clinging to my coat and scratching up my arms, until I finally come to a stop just past the seats all four present members of CP9 are occupying. I wheeze on my side for a long moment.

Then Nero's body is flying into the car, blessedly coming to a halt before hitting me. As the stars clear from my eyes I can see both Sanji, leg still outstretched, and Franky, metal fist uncovered and still extended, right at the gaping maw between the cars.

"It's gotten so noisy all of a sudden," Kalifa complains, rising to her feet.

"So in the end, all of the soldiers in the escort were wiped out?" Blueno commiserates blankly.

"Not that we expected much to begin with," Kaku adds.

"Son of a bitch! Try something like that again and I'll kill you dead!" Sanji yells from the door.

"Super uncool to do a sneak attack like that after we already beat you, rat man," Franky says disparagingly.

Nero pushes himself up onto one knee, blood leaking down his face and making groaning noises.

"Who's this?" Lucci asks, sounding entirely uninterested.

"Probably that new CP9 member Corgi mentioned. That Four Powers guy," Kaku answers.

“Fuck!” Nero huffs. “Fuck our directive! I was known as a martial arts genius, I’m going to kill you!”

“Newbie,” Lucci calls, stepping in between Nero and I and obstructing my view with his ridiculous fluffy white coat.

“Eh..? You’re Rob Lucci, huh? Should have introduced myself sooner. Just hang on a second, I’m going to go kill that guy,” Nero says hoarsely.

“We’re taking Franky alive. You can’t let your emotions take priority over your duties,” Lucci starts explaining before he heaves a sigh. “Nevermind. I’ll give you three seconds, hurry up and run.”

Nero makes a confused sound as Lucci starts counting, I try to push myself up by the elbows and don’t have a whole lot of luck. It has been a very rough past couple of hours. I jolt as Lucci suddenly disappears in a blur, then Nero is being blasted out of the side of the train.

“Everything about you is a work in progress. CP9 doesn’t need you,” Lucci says coldly. “You’re only superhuman if you have all Six Powers, boy. Kalifa,” he calls.

“Yes sir,” she responds.

“Send a report to the director later. ‘The new guy was too weak. We couldn’t use him,’” he orders.

Kalida nods. “Understood.”

Lucci turns on his heel to regard me, still on the floor. We stare at each other for a long second. “Ah. You’re that miserable wretch from the mansion. It’s truly a shame to see you

alive, and sullying that honourable uniform, no less," Lucci sneers, yanking me up to my knees by the collar of my shirt.

I cough out another breath and spit a mouthful of blood onto his ugly ass coat. "It's truly a shame to see you alive as well," I wheeze back. He stares at the red stain in disgust.

"Hey!" Sanji barks. "Hands off Ed!"

Lucci turns to the side, dragging me with him. "Suppose I don't need to ask why you're here, intruder," he drawls, ignoring the demand. "Given the way you open doors, you don't seem a patient man."

"You're right. My parents raised me wrong," Sanji shoots back. "But I was sure as hell taught not to treat someone as lovely as Ed like *that!"*

Lucci raises me up a bit higher and my jacket finally slips off my shoulders. "If you're here for Nico Robin, forget it. The problem is too big for you to be sticking your nose into." He doesn't smile, but his teeth suddenly seem to fill his mouth a lot more. "Some people are just born under unlucky stars. The best thing they can do for the world is die."

I grip onto Lucci's forearm and his eyes snap down to me. "Watch yourself," I gargle.

"Here's an example. If there was a demonic power capable of burning the world to ashes and the only one who could awaken that power was an innocent little eight year old girl, don't you think that little girl should be killed for the sake of humanity?" he asks, staring at me with a sick intensity.

"What a pathetic way of thinking. What, no room left in your budget to give you critical thinking skills?" I taunt. "If eight year old Nico Robin could destroy the whole world, don't you think the fault lies with the World Government? I mean, pushing a kid who essentially holds the key to a doomsday device to a life of crime seems pretty damn stupid—"

Lucci knees me hard in the stomach. I hack more blood up on his dumb coat. He makes more disgusted noises. Prick.

I can vaguely hear both Sanji and Franky yelling but then I'm being pinned to one of the seats by a hand on my neck. The arm rest digs hard into my lower back and I scrabble at Lucci's hand as it closes around my throat.

"Quit the dramatics. I'm just explaining Nico Robin's life to you. She's a violent criminal *now,* but back then she was just a little girl. For as long as she can remember her existence has been a crime. The only thing she can do to make people happy is to disappear. That is her burden to bear," he hisses right into my face.

I try to choke in a breath around his grip. "This is kinkier than I like to get on a first date," I wheeze. "And your naivete around what makes an existence criminal is absolutely astonishing—"

He tightens his hand and I'm forced to stop my speaking against the pressure on my vocal chords.

"That's sexual harassment," I hear Kalifa mutter off to the side.

"Shut up," Lucci demands. "Practically speaking, she should have died twenty years ago. I'm truly glad she'll die before it's too late," he says, sickly sweet with a wide sneering grin. He's still got the dumb fucking pidgeon on his shoulder too.

His hand abruptly loosens, but doesn't let go, when Sanji goes at him for a kick. Lucci's bitchass blocks it effortlessly with his free arm, and Sanji's leg stays suspended and shaking against it as he keeps up the pressure.

"Shut up! Shut your fucking mouth!" he yells.

“Before her demise the government will probably spend years wringing out all her experience, knowledge, and intelligence,” Lucci taunts. “The agony she’ll endure, from now until her final end, just imagine it—”

“FAT CHANCE!” both Sanji and I scream, him trying another kick and me, still trying to wiggle out of his nasty grip.

I’m about to let go of any semblance of decorum and go at him with my teeth when the front door of the car slams open.

“Wait! Robin you can’t go in there, they’ll—” Sniperking’s panicked yelling puts everyone in the train car at a standstill.

Robin barges into the car with Sniperking hanging off her arm, very clearly trying to stop her. My stomach clenches as I realize the discretion of our plan has not only failed, but crashed and burned catastrophically.

“Robin!” Sanji awes in pure elation. “I’m so glad, are you ok?! Did these guys hurt you?! I’m gonna kick their skulls in, so this time for sure let’s go back to where everyone is waiting, ok?!” He sounds so earnest against Robin’s blank stare it hurts.

“I climbed through a window for this! We took down a government official for this!” Sniperking shrieks.

“I’m a little bothered your Captain didn’t even have to show up for this to go tits up,” Franky groans from the back of the car.

“Now that we have a moment can we establish a safeword?” I groan, still weakly trying to push Lucci’s hand off my neck. Fucking hell, I’m gonna be bruised up later. Like a sexy but very mushy peach.

His hand crushes back down on my windpipe and suddenly I’m airborne, then once again being slammed into the seat across the way. This time the backs on my knees smash into the

armrest and involuntarily jerk up, and it's a crying goddamn shame I don't manage to kick him in the balls.

"You should really learn when to shut your mouth if you'd like to keep it attached to your face," Lucci hisses, getting way too close to said mouth for comfort. The fuck is that threat supposed to imply, him *biting my mouth off?*

"This just keeps getting creepier, you fuckin' perv," I choke out. "I like to be wined and dined before kink negotiations—" That comment earns me a tighter grip and a harsh shove that threatens to break the seat.

"I will tear your throat out with my blunt fucking teeth if you don't *stop,"* Lucci whispers right in my ear. Good Jesus I do not think that was supposed to be hot.

"That's still sexual harassment," Kalifa pipes up again.

"Stop whispering sweet nothings in Ed's ears, that's *my* job!" Sanji yells, and I can see his leg arc above Lucci's head before he gets intercepted by Kaku.

The car goes silent as Sniperking crashes onto the ground in the middle of the aisle. Lucci's grip loosens enough that I can turn my head and see Robin, an array of extra arms still extended from upending our friend.

"Robin?! Uh, what are you doing?!" Sanji asks, taking a step back from Kaku while he does the same.

"You won't understand unless I spell it out for you, will you?" she intones, glaring at us.

Lucci's face twists up in this absolutely horrifying smile and he starts laughing in my face.

"Franky! Cut car three loose!" Sniperking yells, scrambling up on his hands and knees.

“What?! Why?!” Franky yells back.

“We’re running away!” he announces.

Fucking balls, nothing ever goes my way.

“Don’t let Franky escape!” Kaku orders.

“Hey, what’s going on?!” Sanji squawks.

“You hurry up too, this fight will be over in seconds!” Sniperking declares, flinging a pellet into the ground that explodes in a dense cloud of white smoke.

As shouts of surprise sound, I swing my left leg over Lucci’s arms and slam my right into his nose. He makes a pained grunt and his grip finally leaves. I roll off the seat and start army crawling down the aisle.

“Nico Robin is ours!” Sniperking screams, charging past me with Robin under his arm.

“Alright!” me, Franky and Sanji all cheer, breaking for the door after him.

I, of fucking course, slip right at the edge and nearly fall off the goddamn train. I’m saved from the embarrassment and pain by Franky hooking his arm around my waist and all but throwing me into the car. Funnily enough, once I’m in I trip over one of the agents I took down and fall on my face anyway. Just my fucking luck.

The train car is unhooked and we’re sliding away before I even get to my feet.

“I can’t believe that worked!” Sniperking shrieks incredulously.

“Careful, they’re not going to let us go that easily. The lady has a whip,” I advise, wiping blood from that guy who I tripped over off on one of the seats. Yeah… guns are kinda violent.

“Your surprise escape strategy even surprised me, so I guess it has some merit,” Franky grunts, squinting off into the dense cloud.

“Smokescreens are so lame people usually just don’t expect them,” Sanji says blandly.

“Again, can’t believe that worked,” Sniperking mumbles.

“Don’t let your guard down, Ed’s right. They’re not going to let us go that easily,” Sanji states, standing guard at the door.

“Yeah, these guys ain’t your average thug,” Franky adds. “Don’t relax until we make enough distance between the cars.”

I spin on Robin and slam one of my feet into the ground beside her. She jolts a little and I lean down to glare at her face to face. “I’ve had a real shit last 24 hours, and you keep making it worse. Knock it off.”

Her face twists up and she opens her mouth, probably to argue like the unhelpful shit she’s being, but the car suddenly jolts.

“Aw shit!” Franky groans.

I glance over and yup, Kalifa’s whip is attaching to the car. There’s screaming and shouting as the car jerks back to whence it came.

“Sniperking, protect Robin with your life!” Sanji shouts, then he’s engaging with Blueno.

I turn back to Robin. “We won’t let up. You know we won’t. You’ve seen firsthand how stubborn we are. Make this easier for everyone involved and spare me a trip through the courthouse, I don’t wanna go if they don’t have that fruity little prosecutor,” I plead.

Her lip starts trembling and her eyes gloss over. For a second I think it’s because I got through to her. Then my arms are being twisted backward and I collapse as my legs are seized. I don’t quite manage to choke back a half scream as all of my injuries light up like a christmas tree.

Sniperking slams to the ground beside me as he’s wrapped up in arms and I struggle futilely against the ones holding me. “For the love of *fuck* Robin, communication precedes bondage!” I yell, arching my back and trying to jerk my arms free.

Robin lets out a strangled scream. “How many times are you going to make me repeat myself?! Leave me *alone!”*

Sanji goes crashing into a row of seats and doesn’t stop until he hits the end of the car. I try to hit Robin with my knees and she just restrains me tighter.

“Damnit Robin stop being a twat!” I scream, flailing as hard as I can. Fuck fuck *fuck,* this could not possibly be going any worse.

“You are all so stubborn!” Franky hollers from the front of the car. “This is our one in a million chance to escape you know!” I can’t see a whole lot from my vantage point, but I hear the cracking and the shouts as Franky rips the entire front of the car off and jumps at the other one.

“Franky you dumbass! Get back here!” I screech. Oh my god oh my god—

“Super! Don’t worry about me guys, I have a plan!” he yells back, voice gaining distance. “Meet up with the Strawhats and get back to town!”

“What are you doing?! I’m not running away with you!” Robin shouts, and finally her grip loosens enough I get my leg free and kick her hard in the back of the knees. Her legs buckle and she goes down, the rest of the arms holding me vanish in a puff of petals.

I lunge and tackle her. “STOP RESISTING AND LET US HELP YOU!” I yell.

She immediately tries to escape, obviously. “STOP TRYING TO HELP ME!” she yells back.

I slap her hands down when she brings them up. “NO U!”

She lets out a strangled shriek and tries to slap me back. “WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?!”

The yelling in the other part of the car is inconsequential right up until Sanji is being kicked past us again — this time from the other side. We both spin back towards where he came from and baulk at Blueno as he steps out of a hole in thin air.

Sniperking imposes himself between us and him as Blueno takes a step towards us. He’s unceremoniously batted to the side by a Finger Pistol and I scrabble for my gun while keeping one arm around Robin.

Sniperking is bleeding on the ground and in half a second I’m joining him. My cheekbone smashes off the ground with a crack that reverberates through my head as Robin gets her wits about her and forces me down.

I see Blueno take a half step towards me before Robin basically throws herself at him. “Stop! I don’t intend to run away! That should be enough for you!”

He grabs her by the arm and drags her towards the air door thing before she shrugs him off. “They’re the ones who keep attacking me. I have no choice,” he says flatly.

“Then let’s leave now,” Robin suggests, already walking into the door.

“Wait!” Sniperking yells hoarsely, managing to push himself up by the elbows while I’m still struggling with getting a hand under myself. “It’s alright..! Robin, you’re alright… You’re still hiding something… right? It’s ok.” He keeps taking breaks to huff in more breath. “But you can’t leave a pirate crew without permission from the Captain!”

I cough up a mouthful of blood and try once again to push myself up. I barely get an inch off the ground before I crash back down. This night has been the fucking worst.

“Robin,” Sniperking’s voice is clear and sincere. “Have faith in Luffy.”

Blueno kicks Sniperking so hard he smashes into me and the pair of us skid across the car until we crash into Sanji.

“Robin!” Sanji screams as she disappears through the air door.

“It’s no use. Nico Robin won’t break our agreement,” Blueno says, face painfully blank.

“The fear of the Buster Call won’t hold her forever,” I cough out, weakly rolling to my side and pulling myself upright with the help of one of the broken seats. “It won’t *haunt* her forever. You won’t keep her.”

He stares down at me. “It’s a nightmare she can never fully escape. Such is the fate of a survivor. You have no idea what that means for her.”

I let out a humourless laugh despite the pain. “Bullshit. Tell her you said that to me, see what she says.”

He continues to stare for a long moment. “She has no will to oppose us,” he finally says. “It’s all for the sake of justice. We sympathize deeply with that woman.”

Sanji yells out something, but I’m very quickly losing strength in my arms. I slump down on top of the seat as Blueno disappears through the air door, just before Sanji can kick the shit out of him.

Sniperking’s hand lands on my ankle and I crane my neck back to glance at him as Sanji comes stumbling back over. We all look at each other for an extended moment.

“...Well fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god Sniperking. It's Sniperking from Sniper Island. Who ever could be under that mask. On my god.

Yeah that could have gone better but when do things *ever* actually work out for Ed?

Damnit I miss T-Bone already. Pray for my man.

Chapter 75: Chapter Seventy Five: I'm Holding Out For A Hero 'Till The Morning Light

Chapter Summary

Holding out for a Hero - Bonnie Taylor

"Can the decisive battle wait until the room stops spinning?" I call out, not bothering to move my head at all.

"Sorry, love. Decisive battle waits for no man," Sanji says apologetically, lifting me up while I squint my eyes shut against the pain.

Chapter Notes

Shrek 2 had its shit right, this song is such good battle music. And I'm never gonna fall out of love with Bonnie Taylor's voice (Though the Shrek version HITS).

School is #kicking my ass and I am not happy about it. WHO SCHEDULED ME A CLASS UNTIL 6 ON A FUCKING FRIDAY?? HUH??? WHO???

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Yeah ok, wake me up when we get rescued," is the last thing I manage to mutter before the night catches up with me.

So it really shouldn't be a surprise that I'm woken up whenever after by getting dropped on the floor while Sniperking and Sanji yell Luffy's name.

I groan into the wooden floor of… somewhere and decide lifting my head isn't worth the fucking effort. There's a whole fucking lot of screaming and yelling going on, probably just to punish me in particular, and I don't get anything clear until someone screams "Enies Lobby is in view! Everyone prepare for the decisive battle!"

“Can the decisive battle wait until the room stops spinning?” I call out, not bothering to move my head at all.

“Sorry, love. Decisive battle waits for no man,” Sanji says apologetically, lifting me up while I squint my eyes shut against the pain.

“Fine, fine,” I mumble into his shoulder, grabbing onto his shirt as hard as I can. “I’ll be good in a minute. Where are we?”

“Some kind of shark train? I don’t know where they got that thing,” he hums back. “We got picked up by those Franky Family guys, you’ve only been out for like twenty or so minutes. Maybe less.”

“Ah, yeah the Rocketman. Have I mentioned I fucking love sharks? And trains. This thing is so awesome,” I mumble. It takes some manoeuvring and jostling, but eventually Sanji sits me down on a bench inside the Rocketman.

“Ed!” Luffy cheers, basically leaping on me the second Sanji is out of the way. I cringe as he nearly hits me in the face, but hold him back just as tight. “You look terrible! You should stop getting hurt in all your plans, I don’t like it.”

“You know what Captain, I usually plan to avoid getting hurt. That’s why I’m not actually that good at planning. You just can’t plan around an inevitability, it seems,” I laugh.

He pulls back. “That didn’t sound smart. Hey, who’s this guy?!” Then he’s flitting off to go pester Sniperking.

“What meat grinder did you get stuck in?” Zoro snorts as he flops down onto the bench beside me with a sharp eye on Sniperking as he dazzles Luffy and Chopper. Oh god he’s bursting into song. “Are you just ok with *that?”* he questions, jerking his chin at him. I glance at him out the corner of my eye. “We both know exactly who that is. I think everyone does.”

I fully turn to him and shove out foreheads together to stare right into his eyes. “Yeah, what’s the problem? That’s Sniperking and he’s here to help us. Pretty nice for a total stranger, ain’t he?” I say, enunciating every syllable.

We stare for a long moment before Zoro sighs. “Yeah. Pretty nice for a stranger,” he concedes. “You really do look like dogshit though. You should have Chopper — Hey Chopper! Stop fawning over that weirdo and take a look at Ed!” he calls over.

Chopper snaps out of his reverie and seems to register the bruised disaster I’ve turned into and promptly starts screaming. “OH MY GOD ED WHAT HAPPENED—”

“I’m fine! My bleeding is mostly internal!” I squawk, jumping up and leaping over Zoro to run behind Nami. “We need to plan our infiltration, we don’t have time for this!”

“I did not let you run off so you could get hurt,” Nami scolds, spinning around on me and turning my face back and forth. “Yeesh. Do you want to get changed? There’s probably more spare clothes in here.”

I swipe the bandana off my head and fling it into the corner, rip off my tie, then start unbuttoning my shirt. “Nah, no need. I like this shirt but I’m willing to let it take one for the team as long as I don’t have to fucking button it again. Looking professional is *hard.”*

She snorts and there’s a scandalized gasp from Paulie as he slaps a hand over his eyes. “Why are you all so — so… indecent?!”

Me and Nami blink at each other before bursting into laughter. “If you think this is indecent, wait until the fighting stops! Ed just gets worse as time goes on! Wait — the privilege of calling Ed indecent is earned!” Nami cackles.

“No! No he can call me indecent now, this is as close to half naked I’ll be getting for at least a few hours!” I howl. “You’d think a guy as fine as that would be desensitized to hot people accosting him!”

His face practically explodes in red. “You plan to take *more clothes off?!”*

Me and Nami only start laughing harder.

“You really are too cute. It’s a damn shame I just spent half that fight betting choked out and dealing with dreadful BDSM etiquette, or your whole rope bondage thing would be super appealing,” I wheeze, nearly collapsing on Nami as the laughing gets worse.

“Do you even do the rope motif on purpose or — wait, what?! That’s why your neck looks like you ate an entire blackberry bush?! Who was choking you?!” Nami questions, turning back to me and genting tilting my head up and back and forth again.

“Chill out, I’m fine. No prolonged asphyxiation or anything. That Lucci guy is just… intense. You should have heard the shit he was whispering in my ears, I know he’s evil but *goddamn,”* I joke, elbowing her with a salacious grin, “had my ass dizzy from more than the choking.”

Nami gasps and smacks me on the shoulder, which hurts because of the insane amount of rolling and falling I’ve done today but whatever. “Don’t even joke about that! I don’t want to have to lecture you of all people about sleeping with the enemy!”

Paulie passes out on the ground with blood spewing from his face and Sanji nearly follows him. “You’re both the worst and you do that on purpose,” Zoro accuses.

“It’s true we’re abominable,” I confirm. “This shirt by the way? Cute as fuck.”

Nami bats her eyes at me. “Aw, thanks Ed. It’s been a miserable couple of hours without you there to compliment me.”

Sanji wipes his face off with his sleeve and I notice he’s changed when I wasn’t looking. “This is going to be harder than any of our other attempts by far,” he says, harshly turning the tone from funny to serious. “I’ll admit I was a little lost on some of what that guy was saying,

but from what I've gathered, they're using Robin's fear of a Buster Call and how much she cares about us to manipulate her, right?"

I scowl at the ground. "Yeah. Our last conversation before she… disappeared heavily featured her fear of it. She was… she was happy that our circumstances weren't identical," I whisper the last part, like admitting a rift in our perceived connection would unhook us completely.

When I look up I catch the tail end of a look between Nami and Zoro. What the actual fuck is up with those two?

"And you're… fine? Ed?" Nami questions hesitantly.

I waver her off. "Yeah I'm cool, no big deal for me."

She makes a face like she doesn't believe me, but eh.

"Despicable, using a vulnerability from her past to manipulate her," Sanji growls. "I'm not making excuses for why we failed, but she was pretty damn unwilling to work with us."

"Admittedly negotiations went a little south," I say mildly.

"Like that has to do with anything! I'll never allow this!" Luffy hollers, throwing his arms in the air.

"Yeah!" Chopper hollers with him.

"Robin you're a jerk!" Luffy yells.

“Why?!” Nami yells back at him, smacking him on the back.

“No, the man has a point,” I interject. “She’s acting like a huge jerk.”

“Yeah, see Ed gets it! Why is she so against us saving her?!” Luffy shouts.

“Because she’s worried about what will happen to us *after* we save her! She’s in pain!” Nami argues.

Luffy makes a frustrated yelling noise. “If we leave her, Robin’ll get killed! It’s not like she actually wants to die, so we’re going after her!”

I involuntarily flinch back.

“Well of course that’s true, but…” Nami trails off.

“Just drop it. It doesn’t change that we’re going to save her,” Zoro says matter of factly.

“I’m gonna send everything and everyone flying! I’ve got a move I want to try out, too…” Luffy grumbles, marching off and winding up his arm.

Nami sends me a little smile with something like relief and something like resignation. I give her a small smile and shrug in return.

“People, come take a look at this!” Paulie calls, apparently up and out of his stupor. “I’ve been there once before to do maintenance on the tracks. I drew this from memory and my memory isn’t great, but this is the basic configuration of Enies Lobby.”

We all make our way over to him and his map and I lean over his shoulder to stare at it, ignoring how red his face gets even if it's adorable. "Any information is a leg up in this situation."

"What's that black part?" Luffy questions, dropping to sit down beside Paulie with Nami beside him.

"A waterfall. You'll see it once we get through the gate. In any case, if we can't take Nico Robin and Franky on this straight path from the main gate to the Gates of Justice, we'll lose," he explains. "That said, even if we rush the island, the only ones with a chance at winning against CP9 are you guys." He glances around at the gathered Strawhats with his mouth quirked up. "After spending some time with you on this train, I've got a pretty good picture of how strong you are."

Zambai leans in and stares at the map for a moment. "You should wait here on the ocean for five minutes, then launch yourselves and the Rocketman onto the island proper. Before you do, we'll go on ahead and force the main gates open so that the train can get through. After that, never mind how many of us get taken out. You just go straight ahead!" I barely hold back a snort. "We've only got 60 men here, they're bound to have more than two or three thousand," he continues. "You Strawhats need to avoid pointless fighting, just go straight after CP9!"

"Right! Luffy shouts. "I got it!"

"He doesn't got it," I interrupt. "He's going to go off guns blazing the second the island is in slingshotting distance."

Everyone blinks at me owlishly.

"What?! Don't do that?!" Zambai shrieks.

Luffy frowns and looks off to the side, making a face. "I wasn't going to do that…" he says rather unconvincingly.

I pat him on the head. “Yes, you were. And honestly I’ve given up trying to work you into plans, so I’m planning around you this time.” He gives me a lopsided smile and I sigh. “Ok, so Luffy will be a distraction as he runs wild through the streets of Enies Lobby. You’ll probably encounter at least one CP9 agent early on,” I say, tracing my finger along the map.

“Does the rest of the plan still stand, then?” Paulie asks wearily.

I nod. “A three stage entrance, I like that. Luffy, then y’all, then us. Once we’re in, no complaint about your plan. Us Strawhats will do what we do best, scream like maniacs and eventually get to where we’re needed, and you guys can focus on grunts and opening gates. Everyone ok with that?” I ask.

There’s nods all around. “We just have to fight through an entire island stronghold of Marines, how hard could it be?” Sanji says breezily.

I throw my head back and laugh. “Exactly. We’re the fucking Strawhats, it’s a typical fucking Sunday. I think. What time is it? Is it Sunday yet?”

“Ok people, we’re reaching the front of the island!” Kokoro’s voice announces from some kind of PA system. “Take a real good look at the sky behind Enies Lobby! Those are the Gates of Justice!”

I immediately stick my head out the window to take a gander. “Oh holy shit.” I breathe out, staring wide eyed at the abso-fucking-lutely immense gate that takes up pretty much the whole damn sky behind the island, half obscured by fog and distance. Luffy squishes in beside me at the window before clamouring out of it.

It’s fucking crazy watching the sky as we leave dark cloudy skies to the omnipresent sunlight of the island without night. The whole area has the weirdest vibe to it, I can’t even tell if it’s a good feeling or not.

“They never open all the way. When a criminal is sent through, they open just enough to slip by. And on the other side of that door is a writhing nest of Sea Kings, like the Calm Belts surrounding the Grand Line. Normal ships can’t enter that. I don’t know how they do it, but the Marines have a way to safely get across,” Kokoro explains. “In other words, if you want to save a criminal who’s being ushered away… you have to do it before they go through the gates!”

I pull my head back in the window and double check my guns are fully loaded. “The next few hours are gonna suck, but… it’s an honour to screw over the government with such lovely people,” I say warmly, grinning at everyone in the car.

A couple people tear up. A couple fully burst into tears. Nami flings herself at me the same time Chopper does and I nearly fall over under their weight.

“EEEEEEED!” they wail.

“Oh my *god* you do this everytime I’m a nice fucking person and I say nice things all the time—”

Zoro cuts my rant off by plucking both of them off me with a flat look. “Nice is not the first word anybody would use to describe you.” He cracks a smile anyways. “But yeah, I’d say this is a fairly good team.”

“AAAAAUGH! LET’S GOOOOOO!” someone in the crowd screams, then the entire car is just a cacophony of yelling and cheering.

“Oh! By the way!” I yell over the crowd, who quiet down at my voice. “Luffy already went on ahead.”

There’s a long tense moment of silence.

“He what,” Paulie says tonelessly.

“OH MY GOD HE’S ON THE FENCE—” someone yells, half stuck out the window.

In a flash the entire car is empty save for us Strawhats, and we’re listening to the distant screams as Sodom and Gomorrah the King Bulls charge the gate. Which, by the way, what the fuck is up with those names? Like the biblical cities??? I have questions.

“Are you all ready?” Kokoro’s voice comes over the PA again. “In four minutes, Rocketman will storm the castle.” Appropriately intense and dramatic, absolute points.

Nami starts fitting together the pieces of her Perfect Clima-Tact and I catch Sniperking by the elbow as he falters. “Are your injuries alright?” Zoro asks, jerking his chin at both of us.

“I’m fine. I’m Sniperking,” Sniperking says matter of factly.

“I’m fine. I’m — er, Ed?” I parrot.

“You’re both idiots,” Zoro corrects. “Are we just going in half cocked with full intent to do nothing but our worst?”

I blow air out between my teeth. “Yeah… Well let’s be honest, we’re gonna crash land in the middle of a crowd to find that our advance party has run into some kinda issue, right? So I say fuck a specific plan, and let’s just knock heads.”

“Wanna bet they only made it through the first gate?” Zoro muses with a wry smile.

“11,000 berri the first gate closed behind them,” I shoot.

“That would be shit luck. You’re on,” he shoots back

“You’re both suckers,” Nami pipes up.

“You say that, but which one of us got screwed over in a bet by some weird almost-relative from like twenty years in advance? Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Zoro scoffs.

“I’m not taking this from a shrub,” I say, pointing a menacing finger at him. That makes both Nami and Zoro burst into cackles for whatever reason. I make a vague gesture at both of them. “I’m unwilling to address whatever this newfound camaraderie is.”

“Don’t worry about it. You ever think Zoro looks like a potted plant?” Nami wheezes.

I shrug. “If you squint. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s been five minutes, two gates should be open” Kokoro’s voice interrupts from the PA.

Zoro salutes and immediately heads for the window, clamoring out of it without a word. Chopper shifts into his reindeer form and Nami turns to Sniperking. “Hey Sniperking, how does this work?” she asks, holding out her Clima-Tact.

“Hey, don’t ask me!” he squawks.

“Samurai man, take care of the fence!” Kokoro orders over the PA. There’s a momentary pause before she speaks again. “Change of plans! Zoro wants everyone to hold on tight!”

Sanji sticks his head out the window. “Hey shitty swordsman! Did something happen?”

“I owe Ed 11k! Gate’s closed!” Zoro’s voice shouts back.

I bark out a laugh before Nami socks me in the shoulder. “That’s bad! Don’t celebrate that!” she squeals.

“We’re gonna hit the gate!” Sniperking screams.

“What do we do?!” Chopper screeches.

“It’s fine,” I sooth. “He said hold on, so hold the fuck on.” There’s a loud clang from outside then some screaming from Kokoro, then the train is fucking airborne.

“WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!” Sniperking screams.

“WE ARE?!” Chopper screeches.

“Nami, you can bury your head in my chest!” Sanji cries.

“THE WATER IS FALLING INTO A GIANT HOLE!” Nami squawks, staring out the window in abject horror. Oh, that’s fucking crazy to look at. The water really is just disappearing into nothing, it’s like looking into the void.

Kinda reminds me of that place that got vaporized. Lulusia. Wonder what that means…

“Zoro, you thought about how we’re gonna land, right?!” Nami screams out the window.

“Just leave it to luck,” he yells back.

“LUCK?!” everyone screams.

“Hey I think we’re about to hit something. Brace for it,” I suggest, staring at the giant we’re about to absolutely fucking body.

“WHAT IS THAT—”

We collide with the giant, I can’t tell if it’s Oimo or Kashii, the entire train rattles and crunches incredibly ominously, then we careen off his back as he collapses and skid across the paved streets of Enies Lobby.

I’m violently thrown off my feet during the whole affair. And by some stroke of either luck or the opposite, I roll right out one of the windows and into a crowd of absolutely baffled soldiers. We stare at each other for a short second before I wave.

“Yo.”

The second one of them fumbles for a weapon, I whip out my pistols and start flipping dials. It starts with the flavour dial, fired in a wide arc before the flame dial follows, lighting the crowd up in an explosion of heat that gives me some wiggle room. I take a running start, then slide on my knees towards where I can see our group of faithful helpers and blast an axe dial slash through the crowd.

I slide to a neat stop, firing an impact shot behind me for the hell of it that makes a whole group of guys blow backwards, right beside Sanji and Zoro as they both fight their way out of the crowd as well.

“Uh. Should we have introduced ourselves?” Zoro asks.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not!” Sanji scoffs.

“We need no introduction, fucking look at us,” I say with a smirk, rising to my feet.

Our allies start cheering while the soldiers start screaming, it's actually pretty nice. "I know that swordsman! He's the bounty hunter stooge under Luffy!" some guy in the crowd yells.

"Hah. He called you a stooge," Sanji snickers.

"That's that weird detective guy! The one with the weird name!" someone else yells out.

I make a face. "Who just called me weird? I'll kick your ass!" I yell back.

"He didn't even recognize you. Must be worse than a stooge. You're pirate A," Zoro snarks at Sanji.

"What?!" Sanji squawks.

"Ok, B," Zoro corrects.

"Boys, you're both pretty. Chill," I interrupt.

"More of them are coming out of the train!" someone in the crowd shrieks. "There must be more in there! Blow it away before more come out!"

"Woah hey no!" I shout. "Don't you dare shoot the shark train!"

They shoot the shark train. With bazookas. I resolve to steal a bazooka. "Stop firing!" someone shouts. "Look!"

"Stop! There's an old lady present!" Kokoro calls out, smiling wide atop the train.

“And a child and a little animal! We’re fragile!” Chimney yells, looking overjoyed to be here, very unlike a hostage.

“The Strawhats threatened us and *made* us run the train!” Kokoro yells before bursting into cackles.

“Do you think she’s trying to convince them she’s had a nervous breakdown?” I mutter out the side of my mouth to the boys.

“I’m not entirely convinced she hasn’t actually had one,” Zoro mutters back.

“That was close! We almost killed the hostages!” one of the Marine yells.

“They would even take the elderly, children, and small animals hostage! Those cowardly pirates!” another one shouts.

I ignore this assault on my character in favour of the giant incredibly ominous cloud forming above the crowd. Call it PTSD, call it pragmatism, I nope outta there. I scrabble back towards the train because I do not want to get struck directly by lightning and have a whole flashback and meltdown.

“What — Ed! Where are you going?!” Zoro yells after me. I flip him the bird.

“Oh! It’s Nami!” Sanij croons from behind me.

“NAMI DON’T HIT ME I’M TRAUMATIZED!” I scream, diving for cover under the train as the air goes electric. There’s a resounding boom behind me and I feel the electrical discharge draw across my skin and pull all of my hair on end.

“It’s not selective?!” Nami screams, followed by a loud thunk and a Sniperking shout of pain.

“Nami why are you hitting Sniperking?!” Chopper shrieks.

“A little bit won’t hurt him,” she responds. I start crawling over there.

“Don’t blame *me!* There must be something wrong with the way you used it! Anyways Usopp says he doesn't remember making a differentiating function!” Sniperking yelps. “But *goddamn,* that thing fucking *punches.”*

“Nami,” I cry, grabbing onto her leg. “You almost killed me!”

She distractedly pats my head while staring at the carnage she caused. And carnage is a kind word for it, a huge swathe of the gathered Marines are burnt to a crip on the ground, Zoro and Sanji joining them.

“NAMI WHAT THE FUCK?!” Zoro screams, stumbling to his feet.

“Just like the electricity I felt when we first met!” Sanji says, sounding quite woozy.

“Apologize, Sniperking,” Nami demands.

“That was all you! *You* apologize!” he shoots back.

“Next time you’re gonna discharge hundreds of volts of electricity, please do it further from me,” I beg as Zoro comes up beside me, brushing soot off himself and making no effort to fix his hair. Not that it would make much of a difference.

“Do it further from anyone you don’t want cooked,” Sniperking rephrases.

“How far ahead exactly did Luffy get?” Zoro asks, staring off into the city.

“The island isn’t huge, he couldn’t have gotten too far,” Nami mutters back.

A building a little ways off explodes. “That’ll be him,” we all say in unison.

I point to it. “We have our heading!”

“I can’t abide by you pirate types causing trouble on Enies Lobby’s main island!” some guy in a weird uniform yells. Oh my god they’re riding dogs.

“Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war I guess?” I mutter, snatching a stray bazooka one of the Marines dropped off the ground.

“Not one of you will cross this line! Prepare yourselves, rogues!” that same guy proclaims, then the dogs are charging at us.

I hoist my stolen bazooka up onto my shoulder with a sly check of the ammo, three shots only it seems, and get ready to fucking blast.

“Wait!” Paulie’s voice yells. “Get on this!” We turn around as Sodom comes… galloping..? up to us like a fucking double decker bus, Paulie and a couple others on top in the giant saddle.

“Holy shit!” Nami and Sniperking gape.

“Don’t forget why we came here! This isn’t the time to rampage!” Paulie shouts down.

“He’s right, this many opponents could take all day,” Sanji agrees. Then Paulie is shooting down ropes for us to catch onto. I twist one up around my wrist and let it pull me up, one eye watching out for any wayward projectiles.

I clamber over the side and help Nami over as the King Bull bulldozes forward through the crowd like it gives no fucks. “Those dogs are still on us!” Nami shouts, looking off behind the bull.

“Take the reins,” Paulie demands, handing them off to Sanji. Then he starts making his way back, pausing to clap Zoro on the shoulder. “If you see *them,* tell them they’re fired.”

Zoro all but grins. “I will.”

Then Paulie and the Galley-La boys are jumping off the back of Sodom and bodying the dog dudes. “Holy mother of god that man is so attractive,” I mumble, totally not staring at Paulie’s ass.

“You have weird taste,” Zoro says with complete disdain.

Pros of riding a giant fucking King Bull through the streets of a military stronghold; it’s fucking awesome. Cons; bitches keep lobbing bombs at us. Not only that, a few very brave and quite stupid souls actually lob *themselves* at us.

Tha bazooka I stole very quickly becomes useless after I fire it into two separate buildings and one unfortunate guy who tried the wrong one on the wrong day. But then again I get to throw it like a fucking javelin (a very heavy one) at another guy which feels fucking incredible, especially when he takes out two guys with him.

Chopper is explaining the King Bull's tragic backstory to the group, but I’m more focused on sniping any idiots who get too close in the absence of our sniper. Speaking of…

“Guys, are we just fine with Sniperking never getting on? Like, are we cool just letting him catch up later?” I ask, blowing some poor sod in the chest and wincing as he falls back and sends three more toppling off a building.

“HE WHAT?!” everyone shrieks.

I blink at them. “Yeah. He didn’t get on. Did none of you notice that? Seriously?”

“Well we can’t go back for him *now!”* Zoro snaps. “Letting him catch up seems to be our only option!”

Nami gasps looking scandalized and scared. “But the island is crawling with Marines! He isn’t Luffy! Alone, his life is—”

“Each island we’ve been on has made us stronger. Every island he’s been on has made him cheat death,” Zoro says firmly. “No one who dies easily would still be with us!”

My heart warms at his conviction. At his yet unwavering faith despite everything else he’s said about him. “You know how well that weirdo can handle himself, no matter how much he’ll scream while he does it,” I sooth.

She bites her lip but nods. “Ok. Yeah, he’ll be fine.”

I give her a smile and a nod back. “We’re about to reach the courthouse. Be on the lookout for snipers!” I call out, absolutely biffing a shot at one of said snipers. “Balls, do I actually still suck at this?!”

The sniper is brutally beaned in the side of the head by a flying piece of rubble, courtesy of Sanji. I’d marvel more at how awesome that was if I wasn’t preoccupied by kicking some shithead off the side of the bull. “Nope! You’re great at it!” Sanji lies.

“I know we’re storming a government island, but good god! Do there need to be so many people?!” I moan, taking a second to breath. Big mistake, the second I close my eyes against the headache setting back in, I’m thrown off my feet by Sodom getting hit by some kind of explosive.

Because I was standing, I get bucked right over the top of the seat in front of me and go sprawling on top of Zoro. There’s a lot of yelling going on from all sides, not super clear on what they’re saying until Zoro tosses me like a sack of flour at the second bull.

One of the Franky Family guys catches me and I stumble onto my feet, looking back at Sodom. He goes down hard as we all bail onto Gomorrah, crashing into a building and taking out a whole swathe of soldiers.

Nami’s hand clamps on my bicep. “Is this going well? I can’t tell if this is going well,” she hisses.

I look around at the thousands of soldiers gunning for our heads. “Yeah. Me either.”

Chapter End Notes

Well. If nothing else, Robin is getting closer?

As always this is a Paulie stan account. I feel absolutely no shame. Also Ed and Nami being little shits together is something I have sorely missed.

AND THAT'S 300K BAYBE!!!

Chapter 76: Chapter Seventy Six: Happiness Hit Her Like A Bullet In The Back

Chapter Summary

Dog Days Are Over - Florence + the Machine

I'll give us one thing, charging through Enies Lobby on a King Bull attracts a lot of attention. So much attention it's a genuine surprise that we hear the baby Transponder Snail ringing from inside Nami's cleavage of all places amongst the gunfire and echoing boom of cannon shells exploding.

Chapter Notes

ROBIN THEME ROBIN THEME—

The entire first half of this chapter reads like I wrote it high off my ass and I don't *think* I was but I honestly can't be sure. I might have just been sleep deprived? Anyway enjoy the laughs gang xoxo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'll give us one thing, charging through Enies Lobby on a King Bull attracts a lot of attention. So much attention it's a genuine surprise that we hear the baby Transponder Snail ringing from inside Nami's cleavage of all places amongst the gunfire and echoing boom of cannon shells exploding.

"Hello?! Who is it?!" Nami shouts over the cacophony of noise.

"It's us!" Kokoro's voice cheers back. "I'm glad you're still alive! Ngagaga!"

I spot the cannonball careening towards us a second before Nami does, and I shove her head down before ducking myself, the projectile sailing way too close to us for comfort before missing and crashing into a building. We blink at each other then shrug.

“What do you want?!” Nami shouts into the snail.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you something! I know you’re busy so I won’t waste your time,” Kokoro responds. “On Paulie’s map there’s no road between the courthouse and the Tower of Law!”

“She’s right. I was wondering about that,” Sanji adds over the din, leaning in close after kicking a chunk of debris away.

“Look at the courthouse. There’s towers on either side, right?” We all look over at the towers. “Each tower has a lever on the top floor, and if you pull it a drawbridge lowers between the courthouse and the Tower of Law.”

“How do you know that, old lady?!” Zambai yells over his shoulder.

“Tom and I came here to do some repairs once upon a time. That ungrateful dim-witted government!” Kokoro yells back.

“Don’t take it out on me!” Zamabi yelps, twisting back around and holding Gomorrah’s reins above his head.

Kokoro laughs again. “Oh, and Chimney wants to—”

“Hello? Hello?!” Chimney practically screams into the Transponder. “Can you hear me?! Pirate lady? Not-lady pirate!?” Which is closely followed by weird meowing sounds, probably from Gonbei.

“Did you just call me not-lady pirate?” I mumble under my breath.

“Yes Chimney? What is it?” Nami asks, elbowing me in the side.

“I, uh, saw the rubber guy climb onto the roof of the courthouse! There was a bunch of crumbling stone — I think there was a fight!” she exclaims.

Nami casts me a sidelong glance. “Think he ran into CP9, or something a little less worrisome?”

“With our luck, definitely CP9,” I respond. “But that’s a solid direction for us to head for.”

“Oh, but keep the Transponder connected, we have lots of information!” Kokoro demands.

“Roger that. You boys hear that?! Head for the courthouse!” Nami calls up.

“You got it! You head straight toward the courthouse roof, we’ll split off and lower the drawbridge!” Zambai announces, sending up a cheer from the other Franky Family members. “I’m counting on you Gomorrah! Take us to the courthouse!”

Wrong thing to say. Gomorrah is promptly assaulted by giant balls connected to chains, one of them smashing into its neck and sending us into a building. God I really hope this place has no access to any contractors or construction workers, just so they can never fix the damage happening today.

To the surprise of absolutely no one, I go toppling over and nearly kick Nami in the head while I fall on my face. “Who are these assholes?!” Zoro snarls.

“The guys chasing us are catching up!” Sanji announces. I groan into the floor of the saddle.

“Hey cook!” Zoro suddenly says.

“Yeah, I saw,” Sanji responds. “Luffy is already fighting CP9, just like you said.”

I pick myself up from the floor to squint up at the courthouse roof. There's a huge chunk of the edge missing, and what looks like Blueno's ugly ass if you squint.

"Of course he is!" Nami groans, clamoring over the seat and pulling me with her. "Not that it super matters right now. We're completely surrounded!"

"Only one way forward then!" Zoro decided, vaulting his seat to jump off the downed King Bull.

"Through the courthouse!" Sanji finishes, going to follow.

"Wait!" Chopper screams. "No one get off! Gomorrah says… 'hold on tight!'"

Everyone pauses in their disembarkment as Gomorrah begins moving again. The Marines start screaming and firing on us with renewed vigour as Gomorrah lurches forward, running directly into another building.

I fall back on my ass because I'm predictable. There's so much yelling and shouting and gunfire going on it's basically drowning out everything everyone else is saying, even though the people around me seem to be hearing fine. Fucking weirdos.

Nami finally hauls me back up to my feet again. "Nami what the actual fuck is happening?" I beg, basically shouting in her ear.

She gives me a long exasperated look. "Gomorrah is blind and we're still going to the courthouse. Everything is quite sad and dramatic," she answers. "OH MY GOD ARE WE ABOUT TO RUN INTO THAT BUILDING?!"

We're about to run into a building. "What building?" Zoro grunts, walking past us.

“I don’t see a building,” Sanji repeats, passing by on our other side.

There’s no building. Well, there isn’t anymore. Because Sanji and Zoro destroy it. And then Gomorrah crashes through the remains and we flop into the square right in front of the courthouse.

“Oh, we made it. Neat,” I blink a couple times. Nami pulls me down off the bull and we all stare up at the giant fucking door of the courthouse.

“Can you see Luffy?” Zoro asks, shading his eyes and squinting at the roof.

“Nope,” Sanji answers, flicking some ash off the end of his cigarette.

“We, ah… we can’t climb that,” Nami mutters.

“Nope,” I agree.

“How many CP9 agents did you see up there..?” Nami asks.

“Just one. The horny guy,” Zoro responds.

I burst out laughing. “The *horny guy?!”*

Zoro’s whole face goes red. “You know what I meant! The guy with the horns!” he yells, smacking me upside the head.

“Oh I know *exactly* what you meant,” I leer. “The goddamn motherfucking *horny guy—”*

“We don’t have time for this!” Nami interrupts, fighting desperately to tamp down a smile.

“I can’t imagine they would take Robin and Franky somewhere as unsecure as a roof, and that everyone would be there,” Sanji pipes up, completely ignoring our idiocy.

“Even so, we have to follow Luffy so we can save Robin,” Chopper says resolutely.

There’s a loud sudden smack from behind us as Yokozuna’s crazy ass stops one of those giant metal balls on chains dead in its tracks. The force of it still blows a shittone of detritus and crap into my face and I hack off to the side as it infests my poor mouth.

“They’re getting away! Three of them!” somebody shouts, pointing off to the side at three huge shapes disappearing into the smoke.

“Why would they run away?! They cornered *us?!”* Chopper balks.

“Don’t go after them — if we keep chasing shit we’ll be here all day!” Zoro orders.

There’s an explosion from where the things ran off to. Sanji comes striding out of the smoke with some huge guy with one of those ball and chains in tow and I do a double take, I hadn’t even noticed him leave. “You’re all too noisy. I checked it out, thought we should know what we’re up against.”

“What the hell is this guy? Another special courthouse unit or something?” someone mutters.

“There’s more out there. Watch your back,” Sanji advises, trotting up beside me.

Zoro goes wandering toward the courthouse as yelling ramps up and more Marines of various uniforms start pouring into the square. With three neat slashes, Zoro has cut a giant hole in the door. “Stop wasting time! I’m moving on!” he barks over his shoulder.

I cheer and go running for the opening. The group splits behind me, the rest of the Strawhats and a few members of the Franky Family following in my steps.

We go in swinging, as we're prone to do. The first minute in the courtroom is just blasting, absolutely bonkers attacks, a not insignificant amount of blood, and of course screaming. "What the hell is that guy?!" someone shouts, pointing up at the judges bench with horror.

"Ok who hired these three jokers and stuck them all in the same trench coat," I deadpan, staring at the weird cerberus lookin' judge.

"Order! This is the sacred chamber of the law! I will now sentence you to your fate and there will be no appeals!" the head in the middle shouts.

"No thanks! We're good!" I yell back. "Ok let's just go up those stairs then, yeah? Zoro! Make a path!" I order.

Zoro clears a path. I don't even know what he does, one second there's a crowd, then there's some loud shing noises, then the crowd is gone. It's awesome. "That's that. Let's go," he mutters.

With our way to the stairs newly free, we all go running for them. "Hey hey hey, get out of the way, reindeer, mosshead!" Sanji yells, running up behind us. "Someone's gotta protect Nami and Ed from these jackasses, and it's gonna be me! Move!" And then he's attacking Zoro.

"Wha — You wanna fight?!" Zoro squawks.

"Shut up! It's your fault!" Sanji snaps. "Follow me, my lovelies, forget this dumbass."

"Er — don't forget we're here to get Robin," Nami says slowly.

Sanji stops cold. “That’s right, Robin is waiting for me to save her! She’s probably crying right now because she misses me so much!” he wails, running up the stairs.

I snag Zoro by the ear as he starts running the opposite direction. “The stairs are quite literally right here, you stupid fucking—”

“That’s not my fault! I hope the architect of this place got fired—”

“There is no possible way you could fuck up a *giant staircase and blame it on the architect* —”

“Zoro I’ll make some medicine later for your brain problem—”

“BRAIN PROBLEM—”

“Make some for Sanji while you’re at it—”

“ROBIN I’M COMING TO SAVE YOU—”

“I think he’s beyond help—”

“DON’T IGNORE ME!”

A giant sword slams down into the stairs right in the middle of our little group, rather rudely disrupting our argument.

“FUCK OFF!” I scream at the three headed judge. “WAIT YOUR TURN!”

“Ed, knock it off! You three go ahead, I got this!” Zoro snaps.

“I’ll show you insolent pirates how horrible I am!” the middle guy screeches, trying to pull the lot of them up onto the stairs from where they’re hanging off the edge. Then they’re being pulled over the side by our absolutely phenomenal allies.

“Thanks gang! You rule!” I holler over the side, then I smack Zoro and Nami both on the back. “Let’s rock and roll, we got a courthouse to climb!”

_____

There’s a myriad of fucking weirdos in this building. All of them suck, and I’m sick of every single one of them. I feel like I’m tearing through a shitty level of a video game. It’s just running down identical hallways and up identical staircased and beating up guys in one of only two uniform styles.

Needless to say, I’m infuriated.

“Holy shit, leave me alone!” I yell, remorselessly kicking the guy who tried to grab my ankle while I run up the stairs in the face. He yells as blood explodes out of his nose and crashes into the other two guys who had been behind him, all three of them falling down.

I had gotten separated from the main group a couple minutes ago, which could have been a blessing considering they’re drawing away a bulk of the force, but by god is it not enough of them.

“Guilty!” There's a shout from the top of the staircase. I turn just in time to see the massive iron ball headed right for my face and belly flop onto the stairs. It crashes into the wall beside me and I scream as stone rains down.

I glare up at the fucker, one of those weirdos built like a brick shithouse with the ball and chains, and flip him the bird. “Rude! You never get taught not to fight in the stairwells?!”

He just gives me a wide grin. “Guilty.”

I roll my eyes and get to my feet. “As charged.”

Then I go running right for him. He heaves his arm back and I can all but feel that massive iron ball coming at me from behind. I leg it fast as I can, absolutely certain I’m not going to make it and amazed when I do, and slide between his dumb legs.

There’s a resounding bang and a grunt as he’s slammed right in the front by his own weapon, and I scramble across the ground away from him as he falls backwards, nearly crushing me. I stare at him for a second, marveling at my own troll in the bathroom moment before the sound of metal being dragged across stone catches my attention.

I whip my head to the rest of the hallway I’ve entered and find it blessedly empty, save one more of these fucking guys. He stalks down the corridor with the ball dragging behind him, looking appropriately menacing while I give him a nervous smile.

“Hey. Any chance you’ll just let me be on my way?” I chance, getting to my feet.

He just chuckles under his breath. “Guilty.”

I groan long and loud. “For the love of — get something new to say!”

With an almighty swing, he launches the metal ball right at me. I brace for a dive or to run under it or something, but at the last second the wall directly to my right explodes as Sanji’s angelic ass comes bursting through and kicking it away and through the opposite wall.

The weirdo grunts as the ball and chain drags him all the way through the hall towards us, then out the hole it made into empty air, apparently going outside and directly into the massive endless hole under us.

I throw my hands up. “Brilliant! Sanji, I could kiss you!”

Sanji, predictably, swoons. “Oh Ed, please do!”

I give him a cheeky grin. “Get us to the roof, and maybe I will.”

Smoke explodes out of his ears with a force I’m worried ruptured something, then he’s grabbing me around the waist and launching himself into the ceiling feet first.

By some fucking miracle, we were on the top floor. Sanji lands neatly on the roof, somehow managing to switch to princess carrying me while doing a flip and not injuring me, and sets me down delicately on my feet. “Undoubtedly we’re the first to arrive. It’s shameful of me to have kept Robin waiting so long, but I’ll gladly take that kiss now,” he muses to himself, closing his eyes and puckering up.

“Nami!” I cry, running over to where she’s already waiting on the roof with Chopper and Zoro.

“What — mosshead?!” Sanji squawks.

“You’re late. What happened, you get lost?” Zoro asks, almost sounding sincere.

“Whoa — oh — oh — oh don’t you dare. Don’t *even* go there—” Sanji’s bitching is cut short by a rapidly increasing scream from none other than Sniperking as he shoots through the air towards us.

“What the hell?” I mumble, watching his trajectory with furrowed eyebrows.

“He’s flying?!” Nami gasps incredulously.

“Where was he?” Sanji questions.

“Uh — is he gonna be able to land?” Zoro asks.

It’s not a particularly safe landing, but it is a landing nonetheless. He has to be literally pried out of the ground, much to my own amusement. After he’s out though, it’s just a smooth stride up to where Luffy is waiting.

“I’m begging you Robin!” he yells. “If you want to die or whatever, that’s fine! But you have to say it as part of our crew!”

There’s shouted agreements from my crewmates. I stare up at Robin’s face as tears form in her eyes. The members of CP9 and Spandam himself are meaningless background to her pain.

I step up onto the castellation at my Captain’s right, arms crossed and chin up. I give her my biggest and brightest smile and watch her take us in.

“Just leave the rest to us!” Luffy announces.

I take a second to breathe and acknowledge that I didn’t actually think I’d make it to this point. You wake up in the middle of the fucking ocean and meet Monkey D. Luffy, and you don’t think ‘oh damn, I’m gonna be standing side by side with this guy at Enies Lobby.’ But here the fuck I am anyways. I take my second to accept that there really was no other option I had or would take if it hadn’t led me here.

“Drawbridge?” Luffy questions, drawing me back into the moment.

“Yeah, the Franky Family are working to lower it,” Zoro answers.

“There’s so many pirates!” a shrill voice shrieks from high on the Tower of Law. Ew, it's Spandam. Gross. I’m not one to insult a man's appearance, but when you look that bad and have to have your face held together by a bunch of leather straps? Justified.

“I’m gonna kill that guy if no one else gets to it first,” I say matter of factly, jerking my chin at him and reveling in the absolute horror on his face. It wasn’t even really a threat, just stating it like the truth.

“Sure, whatever you want,” Luffy replies.

“CP9! Listen up, I’m giving you the order to kill these guys, but do it in the Tower of Law! Since there’s no guarantee they can even make it up here,” Spandam shrieks. God his voice is grating. *God* the cackling is worse. “You stupid pirates! You’ll learn that nothing you do can change things!”

“Ok, I get it now. That guy has to die,” Zoro mutters.

“Cower before the power of the assassin group CP9! Bow under the weight of the Gates of Justice, which mere human powers can’t open!” he screes. Dear lord, he sounds like a perishing bird. “Moreover, I now have the authority to use this golden Transponder Snail to make a Buster Call!” Robin’s face drops and Spandam spins around to her with a leering green. “That’s right, just twenty years ago this power was used to wipe out your homeland, Nico Robin! And the name Ohara disappeared off maps the following year… isn’t that right?!”

“Robin’s homeland..?” Chopper says softly.

“Yeah, ok. If you don’t kill him I will,” Sanji hisses.

“Stop! Not that!” Robin yells, voice already hoarse and desperate.

Spandam throws his head back and cackles. “I love that reaction! It gives me such a thrill! What?! Does that mean I should press this switch and activate the Buster Call?! Hah?! HAH?!”

“Do you realize what will happen if you press that?!” Robin screams.

“I don’t think he’s thought through the consequences of calling indiscriminate fire with the intent to kill everyone on the fucking *judicial island.”* I say, quite loudly.

Spandam’s entire body twitches, but he barrels on. Y’know. Like an idiot. “With just one press of this button, I’ll reduce the chances of these pirates escaping from this island to nil! Does it bring back memories?!” he crows.

“It won’t end that easily! Just stop it!” Robin screams, her vocal chords sound so stretched thin I worry about her coughing up blood if she keeps going.

“You’re pretty cocky, aren’t you?” Spandam grits out.

“You say Ohara was wiped off the map. But maps don’t show you the lives of the people who lived there! Your view of the world is so distant and so *twisted* that you’ve lost sight of your humanity!” Robin screams, right in his dumb face. “You only look through the view of these devices, that’s why you can do such *inhumanly cruel things!”* Her face goes blank and distant like she’s recalling horrors beyond human comprehension. She probably is. “If you sound the Buster Call, right here and now, just like Ed said — it won’t just be pirates… it’ll be *everyone. You included,”* she breathes out.

“B — but that’s ridiculous! As if they’d attack their own men! What the hell are you saying?!” Spandam shrieks.

“Don’t be naive! The Buster Call killed everyone I loved in one fell swoop!” Robin shouts before turning to us, face a mask of just pure pain. “And now that attack is aimed at you, my friends I searched *so* hard to find! The more I wish we could stay together, the more my ugly

fate bares its fangs at you! No matter how far we sail, there's an enemy that haunts me at every turn! Because I'm facing the world — and all its darkness!"

It's sickening, just how far this beautiful wonderful woman has been pushed.

"First with Aokiji, and now with CP9, I just keep putting you in danger! If it goes on like this, no matter how kind you are, some day you'll see me as a burden. Someday you'll be forced to betray me and cast me aside!"

I can feel the sting of my palms, probably almost healed until my nails started digging into them again.

"That's what I'm so afraid of — why I didn't want you to rescue me! If that's why fate, I'd rather just die here!" She focuses her eyes on me. "For the love of god, Ed, I thought you of all people would be able to talk sense into them! You know firsthand the strength of the Buster Call — for fucks sake it messed you up so bad you say it killed you! You *have* to see what I mean!"

I can feel so many eyes on me. I take a deep breath.

Fucking Spandam starts laughing. "Priceless! There's two of you?! But she's right! Having filth like that follow you around, no one would *not* consider that a nuisance!" he cackles. "Look at that flag! It represents the unity of over 170 nations, allied across the four seas and the Grand Line, it represents the world! Do you even comprehend how fruitless your resistance is?! Do you understand the sheer power of the organization you defy?!"

"If that's Robin's enemy, then I understand," Luffy states. "Sniperking… Shoot down that flag."

As always, without a single second of hesitation or resistance, he already has his weapon drawn and aimed. "Roger!"

It’s a column of straight fire right to the World Government flag and I feel nothing but immense satisfaction.

Everyone's jaws drop.

“ARE YOU CRAZY?! DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN SURVIVE WITH THE ENTIRE WORLD GOVERNMENT AS YOUR ENEMY?!” Spandam screams.

“BRING IT ON!” Luffy screams back, right from the pit of his stomach. “ROBIN! I still haven’t heard it from your mouth!” He takes a big breath. “SAY YOU WANT TO LIVE!”

Her entire face crumples. The tears she’s been holding back this whole time spill out of her eyes as she crushes them shut.

“I WANT TO LIVE!” she screams, voice cracking in desperation. “TAKE ME WITH YOU! TAKE ME AWAY FROM HERE!”

I couldn’t stop my smile if you payed me.

“You guys are so awesome, I love you!” Franky cries from behind the ledge.

There’s a resounding shifting sound. “The drawbridge is being lowered!” Chopper shouts.

“Seems they succeeded,” Sanji says with a smirk.

“I — I’m so excited…” Sniperking wheezes, sounding more scared than excited.

“Hurry and lower it,” Zoro hisses with a truly frightening look on his face.

“Your face is so scary,” Nami groans.

I run my fingers over the handles of my pistols. “Unfortunately, I think I’m going to enjoy this.”

“Unfortunate for them or us?” she mumbles.

Luffy just cracks his knuckles with his mile wide grin. “Let’s go!”

Then, because of course nothing with us ever goes even remotely well, the bridge explodes and stops moving. “Son of a bitch,” I mutter.

“Director Spandam! Get out of the Tower of Law!” what sounds like that judge guy yells from somewhere.

“Someone’s interfering! What’s going on?!” Luffy shouts.

Spandam looks like he’s about to pass out. “A — alright! Well done! I have to get the Gates of Justice before they cross. You’re coming with me, Nico Robin! Someone bring Cutty Flam!” he orders, spinning around to grab Robin.

“Robin!” Chopper calls out.

“You idiot pirates! We have the assassination squad of CP9 on our side! Nico Robin, the sole survivor of an island of scholars who conspired to revive the ancient weapon, and Cutty Flam, who inherited the blueprints for said weapon… There’s no way I’d let such an opportunity for power slip away!” Spandam screeches with a big ol’ deranged smile.

Franky stands up and holds out a thick sheaf of weathered paper.

Spandam's smile falters. "That — is that — That can't be! The blueprints for the ancient weapon Pluton?!"

"It's the real thing. Do you believe me?" Franky taunts, his own slightly degraded smile playing on his face. He flips through a couple of the pages. "Kaku, Lucci, you guys should know."

"Did you… actually have that hidden in your body?" Kaku says with all the disappointment of someone watching five years of their life slip away.

"I — is it real?! Is it real?! Hand it over! Give it to me! It's the blueprint of my dreams!" Spandam shrieks.

"Nico Robin," Franky starts. "I gotta admit, the rumors I heard about you are as wrong as can be. While the government was dragging us through this shithole I realized you're not the monster who'll use the ancient weapon for evil." I watch Robin's teary eyes widen.

"Give it to me!" Spandam hisses.

Franky ignores him and continues. "This thing that was passed down through generations of shipwrights wasn't just a blueprint. You hear me, you fuckin' creep?! The reason Mr. Tom and Iceberg would give their lives for this is simple! If the ancient weapon ever got into the hands of someone like you, another one would be needed to stop you! It's what the weapons architect planned!" He tosses us a wild smile. "With Nico Robin around, there's always a chance that weapon will be resurrected! She's a dangerous woman! However, she has friends who will protect her. That's why I'm going to make a wager." He turns back to Spandam and wiggles the blueprints. "If I'm gonna fulfill the architect's wish in this situation, there's only one thing to do."

"Quit your rambling and give it to me! Those blueprints belong to me!" Spandam demands.

Franky holds the blueprints out to the side, breathes fire out his goddamn mouth, and incinerates them.

Spandam collapses to his knees with an incredibly loud and immensely satisfying scream of anguish and the three members of CP9 who wasted five years of their lives for this shit despair.

I can do nothing but throw my head back and laugh. “Oh my god look at his face!”

“The blueprint was left to construct a counter force, but the government was able to find it! It was supposed to be a secret. The moment the blueprint became public, it had to be destroyed!” Franky announces. “Well now the power to counter it is gone! If Nico Robin falls into your hands, we’re doomed! And if the Strawhats win, you’ll have nothing left! I’m gonna bet on them winning!”

Aw. It’s kind of nice to be bet on instead of bet against for once. Then we start to hear the yelling from the Franky Family down in the drawbridge towers. They’re just shouting encouragements and other random shit.

Franky bursts into tears, which is a little funny following his bad bitch move. “You guys! You idiots! Who asked you to come rescue me!”

“SHUT UP YOU GUYS!” Luffy yells down at them. “Robin is waiting! Hurry up and lower the drawbridge!”

“Oh yeah — What the hell are you waiting for?!” Zoro squawks.

“Celebrate later!” I demand.

“Hurry up or I’ll come down there to kick your asses!” Nami shouts.

“You’re so sexy when you talk like that!” Sanji swoons.

“Strawhat!” Franky yells from the tower. “Thanks for helping my men while I was gone, but now that I’m back I’ll show you how super my gratitude can be!”

“I don’t give a damn! We’re busy!” Luffy shouts back.

“HOW DARE YOU!” Spandam shrieks, then Franky is unceremoniously shoved off the edge of the building into the abyss.

“Aw man,” I groan.

“Hey pirates, I heard everything. What are you waiting around for?” Kokoro’s voice comes from Nami’s cleavage.

“Heh? Kokoro? What do you mean? The drawbridge is stuck!” Nami says confusedly, pulling the baby Transponder out.

“Halfway is plenty! I’ll be there in four seconds! Just go for it and jump towards the waterfall!” Kokoro encourages.

“What’s going on?” Luffy questions.

“I don’t know? She said to jump!” Nami responds. The disdain sound of the train horn blares through the air.

“Off we pop then!” I cheer.

“Yeah! Let’s go!” Luffy laughs, stretching his arms to encompass the whole company and jumping off the castellations, pulling all of us with him.

We fall for barely a couple seconds before we crash into the shark head of the Rocketman as it shoots off the half-lowered bridge and careens toward the Tower of Law.

Chapter End Notes

Robin spilling the tea over the side of the Tower of Law like it's the Boston Tea Party.

Hahahhahaha guys why does this fic almost have 100k hits. What. What are you doing. Why are you here. Why.

This may just be the saga Ed has the most costume changes in? Here's another one lmao.

OH GET EXCITED NEXT CHAPTER IS A FAVOURITE OF MINE. STRAP THE FUCK IN IT'S GONNA GET ABSOLUTELY BONKERS.

Chapter 77: Chapter Seventy Seven: I Was Born Hungry

Chapter Summary

Abbey - Mitski

“Oh *fuck* no.”

Chapter Notes

Brace yourselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“WE’RE GONNA HIT THE TOWER!” Nami screams.

“That’s the point! Brace yourselves!” I yell.

Then we’re crashing through the wall. The whole lot of us are violently flung off the front of the Rocketman and thrown about, I skid a couple feet before I’m absolutely buried in rubble. It takes me a second before I can get my limbs to respond and push the slab of rock off.

“Holy fuck! That was awesome!” I holler. “Let’s go again!”

A glance around shows that Luffy is already up and shouting at the rest of the Strawhats to get the fuck up.

“All of you are weird. I’m just making that clear,” Franky states from beside me.

I immediately latch onto him in a shitty half hug. “You were so cool! Did you see the fucking face he made?! I’m a little mad you didn’t burn the blueprints when I told you to but I’m willing to look past that because of the sheer spectacle you made of it.”

“There’s a lot to unpack there we don’t have time for,” Franky says brightly, patting me on the back.

“There’s the stairway! Let’s go!” Luffy shouts, running past us.

“Hold it,” a voice declares from above us. We all twist around until we see that motherfucking beanbag guy up in the corner of the ceiling.

“What the fuck is that?” Luffy asks.

“Chapapa… So you’ve made it into Enies Lobby! But even if you go into the next room, Nico Robin is no longer there. Lucci took her to the Gates of Justice. The director is with them too… Don’t ask me how to find them. We of CP9 won’t let you get to them. Our orders are to kill you all! Chapapa. Unless you kill us all, there’s no way you can rescue Nico Robin. Take a look at this.” And he holds up a key.

“A key?” Luffy questions.

“What for?” Nami adds.

“Nico Robin has been handcuffed with seastone,” he announces. What’s this asshole's name? Fukuro or something? Beanbag is funnier.

“So that’s why Robin has let you push her around, even though she’s so strong! She must feel awful!” Chopper realizes.

“Even if you somehow manage to free Nico Robin, seastone is as hard as diamond. You’ll never be able to remove those handcuffs! If that’s ok with you, go ahead and save her, chapapa!”

“Ed, think you could break those handcuffs?” Zoro questions.

I make a face. “Bend bars once and suddenly people think you’re Superman. No, I don’t think so. Not without seriously hurting her.”

Luffy tries to punch the beanbag guy. “Then hand it over!”

Beanbag seamlessly Shave’s away. “Don’t be hasty! I never said this was the real key.”

“WHAT?!” everyone shouts.

He starts Moonwalk jumping up into the air. “It could be the key to some other set of handcuffs, chapapa. There’s five of us CP9 agents in the tower, myself included. Each of us has a key.”

“So you’re saying unless we beat all of you and test each of your keys we’re shit out of luck?!” Zoro yells.

“What a waste of time! While we’re running around for keys, Robin will be taken to the Gates of Justice!” Sanji snarls.

“Robin is our first priority! Let’s just get her then worry about the keys after!” Nami announces.

“Chapapa.. You’re smart. But if you do that, we’ll just toss these keys into the sea! Chapapa!” the beanbag guy cackles. “Look, we’re giving you a chance. See you later!” Then he’s Shaving and out of there.

“Why you — Come back here!” Luffy roars, going off in a run that takes both Zoro and Sniperking to stop.

“Gang! Calm down!” I bark. “Luffy, you’re going after Lucci and getting Robin! Just head for the Gates of Justice, you’ll find them. That leaves five guys to beat up, and six of you! We can do this no problem!”

“Six of us? Wait, Ed, what are you going to do?” Nami questions.

“I’m going up to Spandam’s office and rooting around until I find something worthwhile. I trust all of you to get down what needs to get done, as long as Sanji stays away from Kalifa. I love you, but your chivalry is only cute until it puts us in jeopardy. You see her; run,” I demand.

Sanij purses his lips but gives me a tight nod. “Any bets on who has the right key?” Zoro questions.

“One of the strong ones, it would just be our luck. Given that Lucci isn’t an option, it’ll probably be the next runner up,” I say, edging around just saying Kaku.

Zoro rolls his eyes. “Alright. Let’s move! Losing a fight means losing time!” We all take off running for the stairs side by side. “Win even if it kills you!”

The group splits off and I just keep going up stairs whenever I can find them. He seems like the kind of guy to have an office on the top floor, self important asshole that he is. Wait — does he have a whole floor to himself?

I stop at the top of the staircase I’m on. Why the fuck doesn’t this place have some schmucks I can threaten into telling me where to go?! I say fuck it and decide this is the floor I’m scouring.

The staircase opened up into this wide hallway with these high ass ceilings. There's a couple big fuck off doors and one that's been left ajar. I trot over to that and stop short when I see the inside.

"There's no way I'm this lucky. This is a joke," I deadpan. It's a big old room with eight chairs laid out in two rows, blood on the floor, and a big desk in front of a wall of windows. One of said windows has a hole smashed through it.

Well that was easier than I thought. There's a couple weird lookin' sconces on the wall plus a singular suspicious painting, but I decide the desk is the best place to look first. For what? I don't know. I have no idea what I'm looking for.

I plop down in his immensely uncomfortable chair and start opening drawers. Ok why are half of these empty. The first two are just completely fucking empty, the third has nothing in it but loose sheets of paper with some kinda shorthand I can't read for the life of me. The long middle drawer has an assortment of pens and shit, and I just steal a handful and shove them in my pocket.

Only one of the drawers is locked, and it takes nothing more than sticking a ruler from the long drawer in and prying to get it open. Inside is a half empty bottle of brandy, a bag of what looks like knock-off Werthers, and a very large bottle of moisturizer.

I refuse on principle to touch the moisturizer for very specific reasons, but snag the brandy and the candy. It'll be a fun little gift for Zoro and Chopper when I see them later. With the whole desk scoured, search for secret compartments included, and deemed entirely useless I abandon it in favour of checking out that suspicious painting.

There's a loud boom as the tower makes some ominous noises, and I pause until the shaking stops. It's gonna get real unstable up here real fast, I gotta make this quick if I don't want to die a pathetic death.

I inspect around the frame for a second before just going right in to trying to take it off the wall. It comes off easy and reveals a safe, because of course it does. "This guy sucks ass at hiding shit," I mutter, looking at the dial and the numbers. "Well, time to put that lesson from Nami to work."

It takes too long. Waaaay too long. Once I figure out it's six goddamn numbers, it takes forever and a bloody lifetime to get the combination. 13, 1, 18, 9, 14, 5. Wait a fucking minute — quick math — Is his combination fucking *Marine in number code???* Stupid fucking egomanic!

"I hate this man. I hate this man so much," I hiss, putting the code in and yanking the door open. Inside innocently sits a little black book. Well, little is relative. This thing is THICK. I pull it out first and flip through a couple pages. Motherfucker, it's encoded. Whatever, while I'm gift giving might as well give this thing to Sabo, as thanks for getting Ace's bitchass. I stick it in my pocket and look back into the safe.

"No fucking way," I deadpan. I reach into the back and pull out the only other item. A bright yellow peach with indented swirls. Are you fucking kidding me?

I freeze as I hear a noise outside in the hallway.

I tuck the Devil Fruit under my arm and try to make my way for the hole in the window as silently as I can. I don't even make it two thirds of the way before slow clapping comes from the door.

"Well, well, well. Detective Domino. Fancy seeing you here," a familiar voice says.

I freeze again, middle of the room mid step. I slowly turn my head.

Standing there leaning against the door, in a white suit complete with a cape, is the Marine I met in the casino way back in Alabasta. A mask hangs from his belt, not unlike the party masks in Water Seven, but worn and sophisticated in a way the others weren't.

I take in his suit and the mask. Something clicks.

“Oh *fuck* no.”

Because this motherfucker is Aigis, CP0.

His face is expressionless, so unlike the last time I saw him on the steps of Alabasta’s palace. “No?” he drawls, cocking his head to the side. “What just clicked for you?”

“You — you’re…” I trail off, lips numb and probably looking like a deer in headlights. The only thing going through my mind if *you’re about to fucking die.*

His hands clap again and I stare at his black gloves with something like dawning horror as I recall a certain dream from Long Ring Long Land. “I’m..?” he drawls, mouth not smiling but voice amused.

“You’re CP0,” I choke out.

One corner of his mouth dips up. “Oh, so you know. That’s interesting.”

I lick my lips, mouth drier than the desert we met in. “Why are you here?” I whisper.

He bares his teeth at me in a sick facsimile of a smile. "Wouldn't you like to know, *pirate?"*

Oh I’m really about to die.

One does not simply quote someone's line from a previous conversation at them like *that* unless they plan to kill them.

“Why are you here?” I repeat.

He rolls his eyes and pushes off the wall. I full body flinch and take a half step away from him. “Honestly? Aokiji mentioned a little something about you and though I don’t report to him, I thought you may be interesting enough to kill my time.”

That absolute *rat bastard.* He sicced a fucking *top form assassin* on me.

“I’ll admit, you’ve been something of a point of interest since Alabasta. Hence the ridiculous act on the steps of the palace, though you seemed to see right through it. Another point of intrigue,” he drones, stepping further into the room.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. Nothing good about drawing the attention of a member of quite possibly the strongest assassin group at the World Government’s disposal.

“Yeah?” I say shakily. “Was it the shoe thing? Or just my skewed reading of social cues?” He chuckles lowly and oh my god— “Was that a fucking VSCO girl laugh?” I blurt.

He stops skskskskk-ing. “A what.”

“Um — nothing,” I say quickly.

We stare at each other for an extended moment. There’s more of those ominous booming cracky noises and the guy gives a disdainful look at the floor. “It’s actually a little funny, seeing CP9 in action. They’re just so inexperienced,” he laments. “I suppose this time I’ll be the one pointing out your Marine issue shoes.”

I glance down at my shoes for not even a fucking second — then my whole world flashes black to white as I’m shot right through a solid stone wall. I scream as I tumble into another room, bricks raining around me.

I push myself up like I have the weight of the world on my back and flip around in complete terror.

He stalks out of the cloud of debris like a predator, completely composed without a hair out of place — looking entirely like he didn't just blast me through a wall. His eyes shine bright with something like glee and I scramble back on my elbows without moving mine away from his.

"It was such a dumb detail," he intones. "I was only in that heated hellhole to monitor the situation — of course I didn't give a rat's ass about my choice of footwear. And still." He pauses on a giant chunk of the wall, staring down at me.

I wheeze in a breath. "What," I cut myself off with a cough, "what's your name?" I choke out. I deserve that much, if he's about to kill me.

His mouth twitches up into a smile. "Sphynica," he says simply.

"Sphynica," I repeat, rolling the name around my mouth. "You're going to kill me."

The smile widens. "I'm still debating it. I'm under no orders," he corrects.

Then there's a chance I can get out of this alive. I'll do whatever it fucking takes to rejoin my friends on the Bridge of Hesitation — I can't let this fucking maniac take me from my family. I belatedly notice I'm still holding the peach in my arms.

Wait.

Should I..?

No. Terrible idea.

But…

Fuck it. I need all the edge I can get. I see Sphynica's eyes shift to the fruit seconds after my attention catches on it. His mouth twists into a frown. "What is…" he trails off, then his eyes flicker with something.

I don't hesitate. I stick the damn thing in my mouth and swallow it whole.

…

It's bad. It's *so damn bad.* I didn't even fucking chew it and it's the worst thing to ever be in my mouth. It's warm where it shouldn't be warm, cold where it shouldn't be cold, slimy and textured in the most uncomfortable way and oh god the *taste*—

It's bad.

Sphynica's jaw drops open in the first show of what looks like genuine emotion since he appeared. "Are you crazy?!" he shrieks. Then he vanishes in a flash as he Shaves right into my face and delivers a devastating kick to the stomach.

The only thing that saves me from either vomiting the fruit up or actually fucking dying is my managing to catch the kick against my impact pistol, and even then the attack carries so much raw force I feel my ribs crack as it sends me flying across the room and through another wall.

I gag with my face to the ground for entirely too long (it's maybe a couple seconds) before I can get my arms under me and stumble to my feet. "Why does the taste linger?" I wheeze into my hands. *Fuck,* breathing hurts—

I hear Sphynica walking towards the goddamn hole I left in the wall and take off running down the hall.

I duck into the first door I reach and thank every god I can that there's a pitcher of water on the table. I start chugging it down without bothering with the stack of paper cups beside it. This thing better be OP as FUCK or I'm gonna be so mad.

I (quietly) slam the pitcher back onto the table and with a quick look around what seems to be a conference chamber, go running for and slip through another door off to the side. It leads to a thin and shittily lit hallway, and I shuffle down it until I get to an intersection.

There's another boom, even louder than the other ones, and the whole hallway shakes. *Shit,* did I just get myself trapped in a super enclosed space while the building comes down?! The shaking continues for a long moment before finally settling.

I pause to catch my breath against the wall, sweat dripping off my brow with the strain breathing is putting on my aching ribs. Ok what the fuck did I just do to my body and/or mind and how the fuck do I figure out what that fruit did? I very clearly don't have a Devil Fruit Encyclopedia on hand to check retroactively, and it's supposed to just like… click in your head eventually, right?

I'm not feeling much of anything besides disgust and pain. Which is a little inconvenient. There's no way I just gave up my incredibly important and vital ability to swim for a dud… did I?

There's a much closer smashing sound, this time sounding like it's on my floor, and I'm praying to god it's not Sphynica on a rampage. That would be… very bad.

Fucking balls, it's hitting me all at once. That was, quite possibly, the stupidest decision I've made since I got here. "Oh my god I'm an idiot," I moan into my hands. "What if I like — turn into a bee or something stupid?" Actually that would be super useful right now. "What if I turn into *tree bark?!"*

This is the worst. I'm the worst. I shake my arms and legs out and ruffle the debris out of my hair. "Ok, Ed. Just… do the thing. Whatever the thing is," I mumble, holding my arms out in front of me.

I just… focus super hard. It's like when you're in bed and you realize you left something across the room and try to use telekinesis even if you (mostly) know it won't work. I'm sure I (mostly) just look constipated.

…

Yeah I'm feeling fuck all. The building shakes again and dust rains from the ceiling on me. I need to not be in here. I take a left down the hallway and come to a door like the one I entered. I slowly crack it open and peek through.

It's what looks like a seating or reception area, there's uncomfortable looking chairs and a desk off to the side. There's a tall wall of portraits of various grumpy looking men, and I fully walk into the room.

My foot catches on a run in the carpet and I fully go into a faceplant. Then it gets… weird.

It's like spinning on a gear. Like a vinyl record being flipped, twisting, planes shifting, pinwheel galaxies folding in on themselves.

I mean, then I faceplant anyways, but it felt weird.

I blink at the ugly carpet for a second. "What the shit," I whisper.

My right shoulder lights up in pain as something sharp grazes it and I yelp, hand coming up to grasp and coming away slick with blood. What..?

Then the wall explodes. I scream, because HOLY FUCK and frantically cover my head with my arms. When things stop falling, I peek out of my hands, then scream again.

Sphynica is crouched above me, a blank but mildly curious look on his face. “You figured out what that Devil Fruit did yet?” he questions.

I scramble backwards from him but he just sighs, gets to his feet and follows me until I’m forced to stop with my back to the wall, then crouches over me again. Oh my god I think I’m hyperventilating. I shake my head frantically in belated response to his question.

He makes a disappointed noise. “Too bad, I’ll admit I’m curious. It was a stupid move, eating it. Stupid, but unexpected enough it’s almost smart.” That’s… generous.

There’s an incredibly loud sound that echoes all through and up the tower. Then I feel it shift.

The whole room moves back a couple inches and I watch Sphynica’s face twist up in a snarl. “Fools. What the fuck do they think they’re doing?”

I can’t for the life of me stop shaking. What do I do? What the actual fuck do I do?! “Did — did the tower just get cut in half?” I squeak.

Sphynica rolls his eyes. “Seems so.”

He gives me a long, long look and I have to avert my eyes at the intensity. He plucks one of his gloves off, then *slams* his hand into the wall beside my head. I bite down another scream.

I mean, I scream anyways when the wall seemingly disappears behind me and I sprawl out onto my back, ribs protesting in the worst way.

He leans down right into my face. “You sure you haven’t figured out the Fruit yet? C’mon, give me something.”

My chest is heaving, my hands are scrambling for my pistols, I can’t look away from his dead looking eyes. His still gloved hand lands on my wrist where it finally finds the handle of my gun and I freeze.

“Don’t make this boring,” he whispers.

There’s a resounding *BAM* and the tower shifts further.

Oh my god oh my god — OK WHAT CAN THIS STUPID FUCKING FRUIT DO?! I shut my eyes tight and take a deep, shuddering breath.

Logia. Paramythia. Zoan.

I’m not feeling any ‘turning into animal’ vibes no matter how much I try, so I’m gonna rule Zoan out. I haven’t spontaneously turned into a windstorm or a pile of dirt, but Sphynica hasn’t exactly tried to physically attack me yet besides bringing a couple walls down so I’m iffy on the Logia business.

“This is taking too long,” Sphynica suddenly announces.

I startle and my eyes flash open just as he spreads my left hand out and pushes his fucking fingers into the palm. I feel the slices left by the porcelain split wide open and barley hold in a whimper as he keeps up his creepy fucking eye contact with me. He doesn’t get the fucking satisfaction.

His face is clinical, blank. “Hm. I was hoping a little pain would do something. Maybe you need a little more than a little.”

Fear lances up through my spine as his ungloved hand clamps down on my left wrist and pure *unbridled* ***agony*** bursts across my skin. I can't help but scream right in his face, tears coming hot and fast as what feels like every cell in my forearm dies one by one.

His expression doesn't change in the least, but his eyes get brighter and brighter as he gets closer and closer, nearly nose to nose with me as I scream and sob.

It feels like an eternity before it stops, and even then the feeling of pain and something like numb pins-and-needles lingers. My chest heaves up and down as I frantically try to catch my breath, the pain of my ribs barely even registering anymore.

"No? Nothing?" he inquires, sounding rather disappointed. "Should I just start poking holes in you until something happens?" I jolt as his gloved fingertips ghosts over my stomach and traces up my ribs, lightly pressing in as I try to take deep breaths.

He abruptly presses his whole hand right into the broken ribs and I howl another scream, choking and gagging on blood as it bubbles up my throat. I barely hear him over the ringing in my ears and my own screaming.

"I don't particularly *want* to cave your chest in to make something happen, but I will if I have to," he sighs, sounding like this is a chore.

This man will die today or when next we meet, but he will not survive me.

He finally lets up pressure, withdrawing his hand and flicking his bangs out of his face, still way too close to mine. "If you're just holding out on me in a misguided attempt at spite, you really should knock it off," he suggests.

Well, fuck this. Fuck everything. Sphynica is staring down at me with that completely blank look on his face. Fuck it. I rear my head back and slam my forehead into his nose.

"Fuck!" he curses, reeling back and slapping his gloved hand onto his face.

I scramble to my feet and book it. The tower shifts again and I nearly stumble, only the pure primal fear coursing through my body keeping me upright. I twist and hurl myself around one corner, then the next, until I come to a small offshoot hallway and practically throw myself into it.

I try to keep my harsh breath as quietly as I possibly can, clamping my hands down over my mouth. My shoulder feels hot, my wrist is fucking burning, and my ribs are on goddamn fire.

I freeze stock still as I hear footsteps down the hall. It comes closer and closer. The distinct click of a heel on tile, the honest to god scariest thing I've ever heard.

"That was stupid," Sphynica's voice crows, echoing from everywhere. *"Real* stupid."

I silently shuffle further down the hall until I bump into another door. I wretch it open, and silently close it. I stare at the door in abject horror. This is like being locked in a cage with an incredibly unstable and incredibly hungry mountain lion. I'm still not feeling anything, whatever that weird shit was when I tripped, it's not happening again.

The door fucking *dissolves.*

One second it's there, the next it's not. I shriek as Sphynica all but just fucking appears, one ungloved hand outstretched before the second is coming right at me, pointer finger aimed for my right eye.

The feeling rushes up inside me. Spinning gears, flipping vinyls, pinwheel galaxies and—

His finger almost goes right through my skull. Instead it glances off my browbone, taking a nice fucking chunk out of my eyebrow and spraying blood all over the right side of my face. I half fall backwards with a great view of Sphynica's bewildered face before he Shave's away and I'm being grabbed by the good wrist and hurled *once again* through the wall.

I roll on the ground, crossing Logia off my list of possibilities, and cough a mouthful of blood out onto the floor.

More blood drips hot and thick into my eye and I frantically try to scrub it out. Both my wrists smart something awful and I'm scared to even look at the left one. I stumble and sway up to my feet. What the shit just happened? Whatever, I need to get the actual fuck out of dodge.

Pain lances up through my right leg as something solid bashes into my knee, then something slices through my thigh. I just manage not to crumple to the ground, barely missing another motherfucking Finger Pistol as Sphynica comes at me in a blur of white and blue.

My hands sting as I rip my pistols out of their holsters. I jerk my right pistol up and fire an impact shot with all the force he used to send me through the wall the first time into his stomach.

Something in my wrist gives and definitely either dislocates or breaks. I bite down a scream and come up with the other pistol to blast straight fire into his face as he rears backwards from the first shot. He bats my gun off the side and the fire shoots somewhere over his shoulder, then his foot kicks hard into my ankle.

I once again, do not fall over, but it's close. Sphynica takes a half step back, picking his leg up and delivering a full roundhouse kick into my chest where I barely manage to catch it with my gun.

Like before, I still go careening through the wall. Only this time, it's actually quite a few. By the time I stop going through things and my ears stop ringing, I can't even use my right hand to push myself up.

I blink my left eye around at the room, the right still full of blood, and frown as I realize I'm back in Spandam's office. I think the tower shifted a bunch more from my… trip.

I need to get out of here. By any means necessary.

I can hear Sphynica's insane ass approaching and take on the monumental task of getting to my feet. He appears in the doorway in a gross facsimile of the way he did what must have only been ten or twenty minutes ago. Maybe less? I can't remember.

"You're too stubborn," he chides.

"You're *crazy,"* I snipe, voice absolutely wrecked.

He pulls a face. "Maybe. But does that matter?"

"You almost obliterated my fucking eye," I hiss.

"And next time I'll take the damn thing out!" he snarls.

I jerk, taken aback by the hostile tone.

He stalks further into the room and I stumble backwards away from him. "I asked for one thing from you, *don't bore me.* And yet, despite all these promising things I've heard about your exploits and the attitude they so loathe upstairs, you've been nothing but a drag."

"Sorry to disappoint, I'll do better next time," I shoot back. Attitude they so loathe upstairs? My feet crunch onto broken glass. I pause as I realize I've walked myself right to the giant broken window.

Sphynica keeps stalking toward me. "For god's sake, you downed a Devil Fruit in the middle of a fight and you're still so unbelievably dull. What's it gonna take? Me eviscerating one of your limbs? The threat of torture until the end of time? Do I have to go collect one of your little crewmates and kill them in front of you?"

My blood goes cold. “You wouldn’t dare,” I hiss.

He gets a manic grin on his face. “Oh? Would that do it?”

“I’d sooner die than let you near them!” I growl.

He pauses, maybe ten feet from me. “Hm,” he hums, “I think I like the sound of that.”

Zoro’s voice echoes through my ears. *Win even if it kills you.*

That’s kind of a bust at this point. I never had a chance of beating this guy, not here and not now.

I take the only option I have left. I turn and throw myself out the window.

I hear Sphynica let out a choked gaspy laugh thing, but I’m already off the fucking edge. Wind whips my face and I pray pray *pray* for a single inkling of anything, *fucking anything—*

Gears and vinyls and galaxies—

My gaze catches on the stone as I fall, and I fucking *turn.*

Chapter End Notes

How do we feel after 5k of straight gas? We feeling ok? Drink some water and take a five minute walk, maybe do a couple jumping jacks.

Absolutely love this song and it fits Sphynica very well in my head in a twisted kinda way. My little creepy and off-putting lad. What is this guy's deal you may ask? Oh honey. *Oh honey.* Nothing even close to good.

DID SOMEBODY SAY ED POWERUP?! YEAH I THINK THEY DID. Figure out what I just did to our protagonist I triple dog dare you.

Oh yeah here's art I've been saving in my back pocket for this exact moment.

Chapter 78: Chapter Seventy Eight: Masters Of The Scene

Chapter Summary

Voulez-Vous - ABBA

I glance over my shoulder to make sure Sphynica isn't following and instead get a sexy view down into the bottomless hole beneath me and start screaming.

"WHAT THE *FUCK?!"*

Chapter Notes

As always ABBA is the superior battle music always no matter what, and I refuse to take a single speck of criticism on this.

Seeing all of you lose your shit over last chapter has been so much fun and your speculation over Ed's DF has been such a trip.

Oh trigger warning there is very graphic murder in this chapter. As a little treat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My feet haven't even hit the stone before I'm running. It doesn't even hit that I'm running on a vertical surface until I'm halfway up the tower.

"What the fuck?!" I yell, not slowing down.

My knee is on fire and my ankle may or may not give out at any moment, but if I stop I fear I may die. I jump over a window (which again, WHAT THE FUCK) and stumble a bit without losing pace.

I glance over my shoulder to make sure Sphynica isn't following and instead get a sexy view down into the bottomless hole beneath me and start screaming.

“WHAT THE *FUCK?!”*

WHAT DID I DO?! WHAT THE ACTUAL SHIT DID I DO?!

I’m almost at the top when an almighty roar pierces through the air and everything starts shaking, near vibrating, with it. Was that Chopper?!

“OF ALL THINGS…” Spandam’s voice rings out from what I assume is an island wide PA system, “I TRIGGERED THE BUSTER CALL?!”

I trip. My ankle rolls and I trip. With my momentum I go right over the edge of the building.

You know — falling in a direction you most certainly shouldn’t be falling in is, for some reason, not the weirdest thing to happen to me — not even the weirdest today — but it is *fucking terrifying.*

The sounds of Spandam actively digging his own grave don’t even register over the rush of wind and all the screaming I’m doing. I try to grab onto the roof with my busted ass hand which does absolutely nothing but HURT—

Oh my god that edge is getting way way way too close oh my god oh my GOD—

“GEARS, VINYLS, GALAXIES—” I scream out, trying to do The Thing again. “FUCKING *TURN DAMNIT!”*

I feel it catch at almost the last second. The world tilts and I slam face first into the concrete of the roof. I think my nose busted on impact, and I choke as yet more blood floods my mouth. I heave breath for a long second just staring at the stone.

“What the fuck,” I whine.

That wasn't me just changing gravity — that was something else entirely. I slip my better off hand under myself to press against my solar plexus. It wasn't gravity itself, it was my centre of gravity spinning on an axis of my own making.

Goddamnnit did I turn myself into a human fucking gyroscope?! This is a problem for later. I push myself up with my good hand, and hiss when shuffling upwards sets my knee, thigh and ankle on fire.

I tentatively peek at my left wrist and do a double take. There's a fucking handprint stamped into the skin, like layers of my fresh have been flayed off as it sluggishly bleeds. Blood has started to soak through the bandage around my palm and I'm getting a little nervous about nerve damage.

I spit a mouthful of blood out, then slowly stumble back towards the edge I almost fell off and peek over.

I can see a bunch of a plant filled room where the building has started to separate, and what looks like Kaku (as a giraffe) and Zoro (covered in blood as usual). Beyond that, I can see the giant looming Gates of Justice, nearly opened all the way. It's barely a speck, but I can see a small dark shape and I just know in my heart of hearts that it's Robin.

I need to get to her, I need to get down there.

I jerk the little black book from my pocket and turn to the back, ripping an empty sheet out and pulling one of my pilfered pens out. I write *shoot the keys to Robin. I'm going ahead. Ignore all the blood up here, I'm fine,* then stab the pen through the bottom of the sheet, pinning it to the roof.

Now I need to get down there, the only question is how. My hand drifts back to my sternum and I frown at the bridge. I can't very well fly over there, but maybe I can… fall?

It wasn't gravity. It was spinning on a gear, it was a vinyl record flipping, it was twisting, planes shifting, and pinwheel galaxies folding in on themselves. It was turning, plain and simple.

It clicks with a sense of startling clarity, the feeling of this intangible something in my chest as I focus — much too like my earlier gyroscope observation for comfort.

It's setting it to spin, and choosing an axis. I take this intangible something in intangible hands, and start turning it forwards.

It feels like riding an escalator for a moment before it's more like sliding down a steep incline. Like a slowly raising treadmill, if you will. Of course, then it catches up and I go falling over the edge. Or, well, I go flying what would be sideways if I was still positioned on the correct axis. Which I'm not.

As soon as I'm over the corner, I panic and instinctively jerk my center of gravity back upright. Then I'm falling down right towards the open gap of the Tower of Law. I barely manage a scream as the rush of wind steals the breath right from my lungs.

I get close enough I can see Zoro twitch and look up, blinking six bewildered eyes at me before I realize I can just turn my direction again, and start falling the other way on a 90 degree angle.

The good news about traveling by falling, it's fucking fast. I'm shooting past the start of the Bridge of hesitation before I even realize I'm close. Then I realize if I don't fucking stop, I'm gonna go right through the Gates of Justice and totes die by drowing in the Tub current.

It's much harder to feel this intangible ball of something in my chest when the whole thing feels like lead with the fear and adrenaline of falling. It takes a hard long second for me to even find it, then an inpreportionate amount of effort to turn it again.

In a weird way it feels like turning the needle of a Log Pose, just inside me. Or something.

Then I realize I'm still super fucking high in the sky and I'm falling towards the ground like a fucking meteor. Well, hope to god I'm actually above the bridge or this is about to *suck.* It'll probably suck either way.

"What the — OH MY GOD!" a pitchy voice screams, then I'm crashing bodily into someone and flattening the both of us on hard unforgiving stone.

I just lay there for a long second, trying not to pass out from pain. When I finally manage to lift my head, I'm met with the gorgeous and bruised face of Nico Robin. Blood is spilling out of her lips like she's all but gnawed through her cheek, tears are pouring out her eyes like they're overflowing, and she's staring at me in befuddled bedazzlement.

"Hey, honey. Did you miss me?" I slur, giving her the biggest smile I can manage.

Then I hear the muffled and hissy scream of whoever I fell on. I'm roughly shoved over and bite down another fucking scream as I land on top of my fucked wrist.

"What in the name of the Five fucking Elder Stars are you *doing here?!"* Spandam screams, pointing at me with a positively trembling hand.

I give him a wicked smile I'm sure is dripping in blood. "You haven't heard? The herald has sent me to collect your fucking soul."

I'd swear his just left his body, given the complete horror stricken face he's making at me, or it would if he had one. Somehow the terror I'm invoking isn't dampered at all by the fact that I'm lying unmoving on the ground in a steadily growing pool of my own blood.

I catch sight of his weird elephant sword off to the side at the same time he does. We both go scrambling for it, but he jabs a finger into my broken nose and grabs it while I'm reeling from how much of a dick move that was.

I duck under his first swing with it, but the second slices through my shoulder right near where Sphynica Finger Pistol-ed me. I grit my teeth and grab my impact pistol with my offhand, firing an impact shot at him that A) blasts the sword out of his hand, and B) hurts like a bitch and makes me drop my goddamn gun. My left just isn't accustomed to the strain, I guess.

As he goes scrambling for the sword I do the first thing I think of. I kick him in the balls as hard as I can.

If I were a smarter man, I probably wouldn't have done it with the ankle I sprained. As he collapses in on himself with a strangled screech, I hop backwards on one foot with an unfortunately similar noise.

"Ed?!" Robin cries.

"FUUUUUUCK!" I howl, trying not to fall over. "OH MY GOD THAT WAS SO *DUMB—"*

"What is wrong with you?!" Spandam gargles, holding his junk without a single drop of blood left in his ugly face. "What kind of backhanded unchivalrous bullcrap was that?!"

"Oh come off it!" I yelp, gingerly putting my foot back down. "I don't want to hear about chivalry from *you!"*

He lunges back for his sword, and I kick him again. With the same foot. This time I do fall over, yelling obscenities to the sky while he screams his fucking head off.

"Ed, stop hurting yourself!" Robin shouts, trying to get to her feet and having a miserable time of it.

"I'm not doing it on purpose!" I groan, trying to push myself back up before collapsing again BECAUSE I TRIED TO USE MY BROKEN WRIST. "FUCKING CHRIST—"

“You insane idiot! Stay out of my way, I’m taking Nico Robin across the bridge and putting her on that boat or I’ll die trying!” Spandam shrieks.

“Sounds perfectly amenable to me!” I snarl, resorting to just using my other pistol from the ground. “I’m gonna fucking *kill you!”*

“Ed, he’s not worth it!” Robin yells, finally making it to at least her knees.

“Not worth what?! My bullet?! Believe me I’ll cope!” I yell back.

“He’s not worth the smear on your consciousness!” she snaps.

“Trust me Robin, there will be no lost sleep over this idiot!” I say, exasperated.

“I AM RIGHT HERE!” Spandam shrieks. An explosion rocks the bridge and I nearly fumble my gun. Spandam, who was halfway to his feet, falls over and smacks his head on the stone. “What the hell—”

We watch a figure get blown out of the tower at the beginning of the bridge and splash into the water.

“Was that Franky?” I ask, squinting.

“He triggered the landmine! Why the hell was he here?!” Spandam squawks. “But that idiot tripped it! What a fool!”

I’m still staring at the water when a foot clips solidly into my jaw. My head knocks back on the pavement and I make a noise of pain. Spandam is already dragging Robin, kicking screaming and crying, down the bridge when I get my head back on straight.

“Launch the ship! I’ll jump on!” he harps, sprinting at the boat on the other side of the bridge.

“Hey! Stop!” I shout desperately, going to follow and literally collapsing as soon as I get a foot under myself. My chin bashes off the stone and I resort to literally dragging myself forward with my less fucked hand. *“Robin!”*

“Watch closely!” Spandam announces. “This next step will engrave my name in history as a he—”

Spandam is absolutely demolished by a goddamn fireball. I blink in shock as he goes flying all the way onto the ship he was trying to get Robin onto. Robin herself is left completely unharmed as all the soldiers that were waiting on the bridge are sniped into oblivion.

I can’t help the incredulous laugh that rattles my lungs as I spot our saviour high upon the Tower of Law. I swear to god I can hear his theme song from here as he poses like the fucking icon he is.

“It’s Longnose!” Robin shouts, overjoyed and freely crying.

I breathe his name like a prayer. *“Usopp.”*

Then my eyes stray lower. I fully might just be hallucinating, but I swear to god I can see Sphynica in one of the windows for a second. I can almost swear I see him *waving.* My smile falters.

“Nico Robin is getting away!” someone yells.

My head jerks back that way and I see her running full tilt towards me. I swipe my pistol from where it fell earlier and try once again to get on my fucking feet but barely get onto my

knees before the one Sphynica kicked sends me back onto my side.

“Don’t let her escape! Shoot her! I want her alive but… shoot to kill!” Spandam orders.

“No!” I shout, considering just trying to use my ability to get myself over there. Then something is shooting past me and all the bullets that were about to hit Robin instead bounce off Franky. “Yes! YEEEEES!” I wheeze, rolling onto my back and planting my feet, then turning my centre of gravity again just long enough to get me upright.

My legs almost fucking give out again, but I catch myself and stumble over to Robin and Franky, grabbing the bundle of red fabric from the ground as I go.

“Franky! Can you hear me, Franky?!” Sniperkings voice calls.

“Hah? What the—” Franky mumbles, pulling a baby Transponder out of fucking nowhere. “Where the hell did this come from?”

“Got it from Nami! Hey, did Ed just pick up the package?” Sniperking continues.

I hold it up with a woozy smile. “Package received! Thank you, you fucking miracle worker!”

“What is that?” Franky asks.

I fish the two keys out of the bundle. “That, my dear, is checkmate,” I announce, holding them up with a sharp smirk at Spandam as his face does the funniest thing it possibly could. “Let’s get that dreadful fashion statement off you, darling.”

“Which one first?” Franky asks, shuffling through the keys he has.

“Lucky number five!” I suggest cheerfully. Robin spins around and Franky fits the key in place. The cuffs come off with a satisfying click and Robin stares at her freed wrists with awe for a long second before halfway collapsing.

Franky catches her by the shoulder. “Woah! Steady there!”

“Wait! Does that mean…” Spandam gawks, “...that you beat all the CP9 members inside the Tower of Law?! No way! They must have stolen the keys and ran!”

“This is Franky!” Franky shouts into the receiver.

“And Ed!” I add.

“Nico Robin is officially out of handcuffs!” he finishes.

“Thank you, Longnose!” Robin cries into the snail.

“Save your thanks for when this is over, and give it to those who worked hard to get the keys,” Sniperking states. “You are undoubtedly a comrade of Luffy’s gang. Enjoy your freedom!”

Robin gives a wet laugh, then turns back to where the Marines are beginning to swarm back onto the bridge. “Now then,” she murmurs, crossing her arms over her chest. Spandam shrieks as a bunch of arms grow from his chest and just start slapping the shit out of him. “I could do this all day.”

“I bet you could, but we gotta move! Guys, get over here! I’ll get ready for departure!” Franky shouts into the receiver. Robin is still slapping Spandam silly. I bet it feels great.

“Can I kill him now *please?”* I beg.

Robin gives me a look. “Ed—”

A massive explosion hits the gated perimeter of the island. “Ah shit,” I groan. “Here we fucking go.”

“What the hell was that?” Franky asks, squinting over the top of his sunglasses.

Another cannon fires from just past the fog billowing out of the Gates of Justice and absolutely fucking demolishes the top of the Tower. Fucking *balls,* I hope Sphynica really was still inside and just got incinerated.

“HEY! USOPP!” we hear Sanji scream through the baby Transponder.

“You called?!” he responds. There’s a loud crash from the other side.

“You’re alive?!” Sanji and Zoro both yell. Sniperking yells something back before Sanji is back on the mic. “Franky, Robin, Ed! We’re alright! We’re on our way, we’ll be there soon!”

“Good,” Robin responds.

“We’ve got to take control here. Can I count on you two for a fight?!” Franky asks.

“Of course,” Robin replies without hesitation.

“I’m about to collapse,” I announce.

Frank and Robin both double take. “Wait, really?!”

“I’ve got maybe five minutes of running on adrenaline left in me, ten if we get real lucky, then I’m down for the count,” I answer honestly, tucking my impact pistol back into its holster and resolving to stick to the other.

“Then we’ll have to make this quick! The escort ship is past the bridge, sounds like our ticket outta here!” Franky laughs.

“We’re already wanted criminals, might as well steal a ship,” Robin muses.

Time blurs. It’s just emptying my gun into as many guys as I can, hiding behind Franky to reload, then doing it again. If anybody gets close enough for me to burn the shit out of them with the flame dial, then I burn the shit out of them. It’s that simple.

Well, it’s simple until the Marines start to retreat.

“No…” Robin breathes out.

“A fleet of warships!” someone screams as said fleet comes emerging from the fog at the Gates of Justice. “The Buster Call has started!”

Robin sinks to her knees as indiscriminate fire starts upon the island. “That sure is something,” Franky mumbles before turning back at us. “Uh, is she ok?”

I bend over at the waist and put my hands on Robin’s shoulders. She blinks up at me with glossy eyes. “I — I can’t stop shaking!” she hisses through chattering teeth.

“I’d crouch down to make this more meaningful but if I get on my knees I’m not getting back up,” I start. She lets out a watery and choked giggle. “I can promise you, with absolutely 100% certainty, that we’re all going to be fine. This is not Ohara, and none of us are going to die,” I say firmly.

“How can you be sure of that?” she pleads.

“I just am. You’re gonna have to trust me this time,” I say, a lopsided smile on my busted face. “You’ve built up something of an immunity to my sound logic, but I figure it’s worth a try.”

Franky loudly sniffs beside us and we both gracefully ignore that he has totally started crying.

Robin’s hands grasp my elbows as she lets out another watery laugh. “Considering your actions over the past few hours, I think the word logical should be stricken from your vocabulary.” One of the battleships fucking explodes and she jerks forward hard, eyes slamming shut as a full body shudder works its way through her. “U — Unfortunately, I don’t think I can be very logical right now, either.”

I’m 90% sure that was Luffy on that battleship. Nice. Oh my god are they firing on their own ship? Marines are fucking crazy.

“Did you see that?! Strawhat was causing trouble on that ship and got blown to bits! Your Captain is dead!” Spandam shrieks, howling in laughter.

I whip my head around with the sharpest glare I can possibly manage, very much aided by the amount of blood I’m sporting, and stare him down. He shrieks again and stumbles a step back.

“Hey, hey…” Franky growls, “that took out your own men!”

“W — well that’s just the power of the Buster call which I, Spandam, invoked!” he declares proudly, voice still shaking. “This is justice! Now hand over Nico Robin! If you do, I’ll overlook your crimes! Why are you protecting her anyway?!”

“I’m gonna kill him!” I announce once again, straightening up and starting to march at him.

Spandam screams and fumbles around for his sword, drawing it and swinging it at us. Halfway through the swing the damn thing swells, balloons, and fucking *grows into an elephant.*

“WHO GAVE HIM THAT?!” I shriek, nearly falling flat on my ass if not for Franky pushing me out of the way and diverting the attack. It’s an outright fucking miracle netiher Robin or I are sliced right open by how close the blade gets.

I, the opportunist I am, run past the fucking elephant until I’m close enough to an incredibly panicked Spandam to put my gun right to his forehead. “Last words?” I sneer.

“DON’T KILL ME! I — I MEAN YOU *CAN’T* KILL ME!” he screams at the top of his lungs, flailing and trying to stumble back, but Franky was holding onto the elephant sword and he didn’t let go of it so he really just falls back on his ass. “I’m the director of CP9! I’m the man who brought Nico Robin to the Gates of Justice! I’m a *hero!”*

I grimace at him. “Yeah, but you’re not. I don't put a lot of stock in legacy,” I say coldly, “but with you, the apple really doesn’t fall far from the tree. Rotten fruit from rotten fruit.”

He scrambles back and I take steps to follow. “M — my father was a—”

“Piece of shit,” I finish for him. “Just like you. Sorry to break it to you.”

“SOMEBODY SHOOT THEM!” he screams, frantically craning his head at the Marines still on the bridge. As soon as any of them reach for rifles or weapons, arms grow from their bodies and slap them away or restrain them.

I glance back at Robin. Her eyes are wide and vulnerable, but she gives me a little nod. I give her a big smile then turn back to the human refuse.

“Hey Spandam.” He whimpers. “Chivalry is dead.”

I shoot him right between the eyes.

As I watch the grey matter leak from his shattered skull I feel a little piece of my soul pass a test and achieve the right to reach heaven. I huff a breath. “Nice. Hey can something catch this?”

“Catch what?” Franky calls, having subdued the elephant sword.

“Me,” I deadpan as my legs finally give out.

I hear Franky curse as I fully just flop to the ground, a couple pairs of arms springing from the unforgiving stone to hold me up. Franky reaches me a second later, scooping me up no problem.

“Sorry guys, this is really shit timing,” I apologize, pressing the heel of my not-fucked hand into my eye. “Wasn’t my intention to be dead weight down here.”

“Dead weight?” Franky laughs incredulously. “You just cold blooded murdered a government official after taking out a bunch of Marine soldiers. You Strawhats are fucking crazy, absolutely no hesitation to do the unthinkable for each other… I couldn’t have bet on anybody better.”

I blink a couple times. “You’re going to make me cry. Is that what you want? A crying cripple in the middle of this battlefield?” I whine as he hoists me over his shoulder.

“Hey, I’ve been thinking of ways to make that vomit stain pay since Mr. Tom… So you’ll have to deal if I get a little emotional now that the fucker is dead,” he laughs. “I already died

once. I don’t mind throwing my life away so you Strawhats can leave here. Now let’s get that escort ship and get you the fuck out of here!”

I’m suddenly struck by the little similarities between Franky and I. The tiny points in both our stories that parallel each other despite all the glaring differences.

“I’ll help,” Robin proclaims, standing on sure legs with a determined smile. “You’re right, this isn’t Ohara! I have nothing to be afraid of because I’m not alone anymore!”

These two are truly incredible. I find myself in awe at the pair of them. “This is such a power couple moment,” I mumble to myself.

“What was that?” Franky asks distractedly as he throws himself back into the fight with me in tow.

“Nothing!”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is my gift to you. Murder and Frobin mention, the greatest things I can bestow upon ye.

So how are we liking Ed's power up so far? They're absolutely dogshit at using it, and they continue to be the dumbest person in any given room. I promie they'll get better lmao. Eventually. Is now a good time to mention I don't know anything about physics and almost failed every science class I've ever taken?

I'd like to give you all a formal warning; the next chapter made me sob like a child while writing it so uh. Take that as you will.

Chapter 79: Chapter Seventy Nine: This Ship Will Carry Our Bodies Safe To Shore

Chapter Summary

Little Talks - Of Monsters and Men

“Put me down I think I’m gonna be sick!” I groan from over his shoulder. I severely overestimated the strength of my stomach and underestimated how much moving would be required to take a government vessel by force.

Chapter Notes

I sure hope none of you had plans to be emotionally stable today.

Full disclosure I cried like a little bitch writing this so I pray for you poor souls who have to read it. Get tissues, get water, get some chocolate to make you feel better for after, and tell your loved ones you love 'em.

It is not recommended you read this on public transport.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sorry sailors! I claim this ship in the name of Franky and friends!” Franky announces as the last Marine is vanquished from the boat.

“Put me down I think I’m gonna be sick!” I groan from over his shoulder. I severely overestimated the strength of my stomach and underestimated how much moving would be required to take a government vessel by force.

Franky very quickly puts me down on the floor. “Yeah, it’s a big no-no to have you vomiting down my back. That would take a lot to clean up, and neither of us would enjoy me asking for help with that.”

Robin chuckles and crouches down beside me. “Now that we have the escort ship, we’ll be out of here as soon as the rest of the Strawhats arrive.”

I slump down into her knee. “They better make it fast, I’m quite literally on my last limb here. My stackable concussions are catching up.”

“How many times have you hit your head today exactly?” Robin asks worriedly. I have to pause to think about it.

I’m saved from doing the math and the horrifying reality that the number is much higher than it should be by a voice echoing from the waters.

“Don’t you guys… die on me!”

Then Kokoro, in full mermaid form, comes exploding over the side of the ship with a tidal wave and our crewmates in tow.

“Yowza!” Franky screeches.

“Impeccable timing!” I groan. She drops the lot of them onto the deck of the ship and they all look fully dead and horrified. “I don’t know what to say about the delivery, however.”

“Oh they’re fine, just half dead from shock. Wonder what could have done that!” Kokoro says cheerfully, her tail separating into legs as she starts pulling her clothes back on.

“You. It was definitely you,” Franky deadpans.

She clocks onto Robin. “Oh! You’re the young lady the Pirate-King-boy was trying to save! I remember you from the shift station. I never would have thought you knuckleheads would do something like this! Back then I didn’t put much stock in what he was saying, about becoming King and all, but he might really do it!”

I can't help but laugh. "He does have that effect."

My fellows chose that moment to sputter awake. At least the boys do.

"Is — Is Nami alright?!" Sanji wheezes, hacking water all over the deck.

"You're alive!" Kokoro cheers.

"OH MY GOD IT WAS REAL! But mermaids don't really exist?!" Sniperking shrieks.

"So the legend about mermaids being dugongs is true?!" Zoro yelps.

"Idiot! She still hasn't said she's a mermaid! Don't give up on the dream!" Sanji cries.

"I'm an icefish mermaid," Kokoro pipes up.

"STOP IT!" Sanji wails.

"Woah! Zoro, Sanji, what the fuck did you just say?" I interrupt, agast. "I mean, I expect a level of rudeness from Zoro always, but *Sanji.* I'm disappointed in you." Sanji's face falls so fast I almost feel bad. Almost. "This woman just saved your lives, you will treat her with respect!"

Kokoro just laughs. "Oh don't worry about that! Disappointing sailors is a hobby of mine."

I huff. "That doesn't make it ok and I expect an apology and thanks on your behalf. If I could stand I would smack them."

Right on cue, both boys make noises of pain as Nami rouses to do just that, giving me a resolute nod while she does. “Sorry. Thank you,” the boys chorus.

Once that’s settled, both Nami and Chopper throw themselves at Robin screaming and crying. “Thank goodness we made it in time, Robin! You’re alright!” Nami sobs, nearly taking me out trying to pull me into the hug as well. It doesn’t exactly work, what with me being unable to stand up.

“Yes, it’s thanks to you guys,” Robin says softly, a beaming smile on her face as she lets them cling to her.

“Cool! You’re a mermaid? I always thought it was weird that you had fins and scales!” Chimney awes.

“You should have noticed that!” Franky squawks.

Chopper suddenly falls frozen to the floor with a wheezy sound. “I… can’t move…”

“I thought as much. I’ll explain later,” Zoro says, then perks his head up when Sniperking calls his name from off the boat and goes to follow.

“Don’t worry Chops, I’m pretty much in the same boat. Literally and figuratively,” I say cheerfully, wiggling my semi useless legs at him before wincing. “Ow. Shouldn't have done that.”

Chopper starts trying to wiggle his way over to me to no avail. “What did you do?! Oh my god, you need a doctor! Why is your wrist at that angle?!” he screeches.

“I’m totally fine!” I proclaim before shrinking in on myself as my broken ribs throb. “On second thought, I may be dying.”

“How bad is it? Why are you so fucked up?” Nami questions, crouching beside me with a worried expression.

I pause to think for a second. “Alright so I’ve definitely got a concussion. Maybe four. Broken ribs. Wrist is broken, my ankle may be broken. My other wrist is… whatever that is, my chest might be concave now, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to eat again with the type of kicking that has been done to my stomach, my shoulder is pretty fucked, and my neck still really hurts from the choking,” I list. “Oh and also I’ve been kicked though upwards of 6 or 8 walls today and my entire body feels like a bruise.”

The group stares at me in horrified silence for a moment.

“I’m totally fine though,” I add lamely. It doesn't inspire the confidence in the group I was hoping for.

“Ed why the hell did you keep fighting in this state?” Robin demands, eyes big and concerned.

“Better question; who the hell did all this damage to you?” Nami gapes, gesturing to my everything. “I thought you were just going to an office and leaving the CP9 agents to us?!”

I grimace and glance back to the half destroyed tower. “Met an old acquaintance. He was quite disappointed in my apparent ‘borningness,’” I drone with air quotes. “Robin, you remember that guy from the casino way back in Rainbase?”

Robin appears to think for a second before blanching. “I knew there was something wrong with that man. I didn’t even notice him until you acknowledged him, and when you live a life like mine, people don’t just go unnoticed around you… He was here? He was here and he did this to you?”

I take a deep breath and fight down another cringe at the pain. “Yeeeep. No idea what happened to him after I jumped out the window. We can hope he was still in the building and

died in an explosion, but it's highly unlikely. The only reason I'm alive is because he wasn't putting in a real effort to kill me."

"Who was he?" Chopper asks, splayed out on his back in Nami's lap.

"Oh, you know," I say slowly. "Um — A — Er — …so about that." Everyone stares at me. I laugh nervously. "Uhhh… so you know how we're out here fighting CP9? And they're supposedly the strongest secret assassin group the governments got? So that's not… strictly true."

"Ed," Robin whispers. "Say you're joking I swear to god."

"Ahhahhah… Yeaaaah…" I laugh, high pitched and squeaky. "He's kinda sorta maybe definitely a part of CP0. Like, undoubtedly. Hahaha…"

Robin drops her head into her hands and Nami and Chopper side eye each other. "I would ask what that means but based on your delivery it's something that should definitely wait until we're out of this crisis," Nami says slowly.

"You know what, great plan," I agree, shutting my eyes and flopping onto my back. "Would anyone mind if I took a quick power nap? I'm not super sure I'll be much help for a while."

Robin's hand ghosts over my forehead. I mean, I guess it's Robin. "Yeah, Ed. We'll be out of here in no time and then you can have another nap for as long as you need," she says softly.

I hum and let the lingering black that's been licking at the back of my mind for the past few hours swallow me whole.

———

So I wake up to an explosion. Which I should have remembered would happen. But in my defence, these have been the most stressful hours of my life. I think I can be forgiven for forgetting about a ship exploding.

Right, so one minute I'm dozing, the next screaming my head off because the ship is exploding and somehow Sanji is there and carrying me, Chopper, Kokoro, Chimney and Gonbei to (relative) safety.

"What the fuck?!" I shriek as we're dropped onto the ground beside Nami in the middle of a crowd of Marines. "Where did the rest of the bridge go?!" Because we are literally trapped on one of two supports left and surrounded at all sides by warships. "I leave you unsupervised for ten minutes—"

"Ed! Not the time!" Nami snaps, hitting a Marine in the junk with her Clima-Tact. "At this rate we're gonna have to fight *everyone* to get out of here!"

"I think we're a little outnumbered for that!" Sanji yells, kicking a Marine over the edge.

I struggle immensely with getting to my feet, but I do it. With my left pistol firing nothing but ordinary ammo, I get to work helping thin the crowd. One guy sneaks up behind me and gets slapped for his trouble, and turned into the unfortunate guinea pig for my new powers.

After he goes careening off the side of the bridge and doesn't stop for a solid ten seconds before abruptly dropping into the water people stop getting close enough for me to touch. Good to know this works on other people I guess, as well as having an idea of how long the control lasts outside of contact.

"Prepare to fire at the first support!" a voice announces through a snail aboard one of the warships. "Strawhat Luffy's pirating days are over!"

I spin around to the support in question with alarm. "Luffy is still down there?!"

“Luffy’s in danger! At least bring him over here!” Zoro shouts in a panic, somewhere in the crowd.

“Luffy!” Sniperking screams, perched on an I-beam sticking out of the bridge.

“It’s no use, if I pull him from here he’ll fall into the sea midway!” Robin calls.

Everyone is shouting around me; Luffy’s name, encouragement, pleas, whatever they can think of. Amidst the shouting though, there’s a voice. “Who is..?” I mumble before it clicks.

“Look down!” she yells, stalwart and desperate all in one breath.

I start crying. Because that is the appropriate reaction. I start fully sobbing in the middle of this fucking bridge surrounded by enemies and friends alike. I know the cost of our rescue, and I mourn that I haven’t managed to pay it on my own.

“JUMP INTO THE SEA!” Usopp’s voice screams through the crowd. “INTO THE SEA!”

“Is now a good time to mention I’m newly a hammer?!” I yell for shits and giggles.

“WHAT?!”

“JUMP! SHE CAME ALL THE WAY TO GET US!” I holler, throwing myself over the side of the bridge and *(gears, vinyls, galaxies—)* turning until I’m falling the right direction. I am *not* getting in the fucking water right now.

“Everyone, let’s go back to the high seas of adventure!” she cries.

The support explodes behind me as I land soundly on the deck of the Merry. Feet first, then knees, then hands.

"I came for you!" she shouts.

"You came…" I sob, forehead to the deck. "I'm so sorry—"

"Merry! The Going Merry is alive!" Usopp wails as he climbs on deck.

"Hurry up!" Zoro yells, hauling Chimney and Gobei over while Nami stumbles onto the deck. All of the Devil Fruit users are tossed up onto the deck by Kokoro.

"It's Merry! The Going Merry! I love you, Going Merry!" Chopper cries, rolling around the deck with tears exploding off his face.

"I… I can't believe it! Wasn't this ship destroyed?" Franky questions.

"Who brought her here?" Nami asks confusedly.

"We'll figure it out later! Everybody to their positions, we're getting out of here!" Zoro orders.

Luffy flops onto the deck beside me. "That was close! I totally thought we were gonna die!" he wheezes before turning to Robin. "Hey, Robin! Thanks for help—"

Robin cuts him off by smacking a hand over his mouth, a sweet smile on her face. "Thank you, everyone," she says sincerely.

Luffy just starts laughing while everyone smiles. "Don't worry about it!"

“Save the pointless chatter for after we escape!” Zoro barks.

“Waddya mean, *pointless,* mosshead?!” Sanji growls, launching himself at Zoro. How they still have so much energy is beyond me.

“Shut up! If we die it was all for nothing!” Zoro yells back.

Chopper latches onto his leg with his teeth. “Apologize to Robin!”

“Sanji, man the helm!” Nami shouts.

Sanji immediately bails on his fight. “Whatever you say, Nami!”

“Catch the wind from the starboard side and head east!” Nami orders, marching off to the back of the ship.

“They’re aiming their guns at us!” Usopp shrieks. “They’re closing in at all sides! *Look at those fucking cannons!* There’s no way they can miss! BRACE FOR IT!”

All of the ships fire at once, and not a single cannonball even comes close. All they manage to do is hit each other, and when one of them tries to pull back, crash right into another. The waters get choppy as a whirlpool starts to form — courtesy of the Gates of Justice slowly closing.

I can’t help but laugh at the smug look on Sanji’s face, however wet it sounds. “Well played, angel eyes. Well played.”

He gives me a big old beaming smile. “Well we weren’t going to get out of here with hard work alone.”

“You’re a genius!” Luffy and Usopp both shout.

“We aren’t out of the woods yet! That whirlpool is a threat to us too!” Zoro yells, stomping down the stairs.

“Oh right! We’re gonna die!” Chopper shrieks.

“Shut it, guys! There’s no sea the Going Merry can’t cross!” Nami proclaims.

“You said it Nami! Especially with you as our navigator!” Sanji cheers.

“Hang on until I can read the path of the whirlpool!” she orders.

“You can count on me!” ge hollers back.

“That’s gonna be a direct hit! We can’t dodge that!” Usopp screams, pointing at incoming cannon volley.

It’s a good thing we have Luffy and people willing to use him as a fucked up trampoline shield to divert the cannonballs. God bless Sanji and Zoro, who are completely unashamed of their actions even as Usopp calls them monsters. They simply flash peace signs without remorse.

“Got it! Chopper, full left!” Nami shouts. “Bearing, nine o’clock!” The ship lurches to the side as the current of the whirlpool takes us, then we’re shooting off past a bulk of the ships at incredible speed. “Franky, now!”

“You got it!” Franky responds from the back. “This’ll be rough on the ship, but here we go!”

Then we're flying. Fully fucking flying.

"This is nothing! The Merry has been 30 thousand feet in the air!" Usopp boasts, shooting off one last projectile at the ships, covering our escape in a thick smokescreen. It really is so lame it just works.

Fuck the warships, fuck the cannon fire, fuck every single naval officer aboard every single one of those ships. We get away on the flying Going *motherfucking* Merry.

"Hey! Someone get me on Merry's head!" Luffy demands.

Franky takes up the task, seamlessly lifting our Captain and plonking him right on the figurehead. "This alright?"

"Yup! This is my special seat!" Luffy says cheerfully, winding his arms round the sheephead in a hug. "Thanks, Merry!"

"But you guys are in a lot of trouble now," Franky pipes up. "You've sullied the flag of the World Government."

"We just took back what they took from us! We won the fight!" Luffy proclaims.

Everyone on the ship cheers with him, but I can't bring myself to get up from the deck to join them.

"Ed? Can you stand?" Robin asks softly after a while, the rest of the crew bustling about as we get further and further from the ruins of Enies Lobby and the Buster Call ships.

I minutely shake my head. I focus on the gentle sway of the Merry and try to memorize the feeling of her deck against my hands. This should be a happy moment, we got out of that hellhole in one piece and only a little worse for wear, but still…

Robin's arms wind under me and she carries me over to the stairs, setting me down on them and taking a seat beside me. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asks gently, taking my left hand in her own.

"I feel like this consoling thing is going the wrong way, after the way today has gone" I mutter, threading our fingers together but being careful to keep my bloodied palm off hers.

She chuckles. "You can console me later. Now what's on your mind?"

I take a moment to stare at Merry's figurehead from across the deck. "Have you ever actually given thought to what funeral rites you'll want?" I blurt.

Robin blinks a couple times but doesn't outwardly react other than that. "Not particularly. I never assumed I'd have somebody who would carry out whatever I wanted. My mind has always been the most important part of myself, what happens to my body after my death has never seemed that big of a deal."

I turn my face to stare at the deck where it meets the stairs and nod. "My family was eclectic about ours, I wish I asked where they came from now. We'd have a classic western all black reception mourning funeral, then a private celebration of life dressed up in white thing," I explain.

"Yeah?" Robin hums. "A celebration of life sounds quite nice."

I chuckle weakly. "My mom didn't want the whole mourning part — she wanted to be cremated and have her ashes scattered. I mean, it's not like I can really fulfil that for her anymore but…" I trail off. Robin's hand squeezes mine.

I shake my head slightly and snicker. “I wanted a viking funeral. Stick me in a boat and set that bitch on fire. Where I'm from that's not actually legal, you need to get special permissions for it that there's no way I could get. That or get my ashes turned into a sword or some shit.”

Robin laughs. “You would make a rather fabulous sword.”

“Wouldn’t I?” I say, voice soaking in wry amusement.

Robin sobers up pretty fast. “Why do you bring this up?”

I lean my head on her shoulder and close my eyes for a moment. “What do you suppose Merry will like? Would a viking funeral be good enough for her? She deserves to be honoured like the warrior she is.”

Robin’s breath catches. “Is this hypothetical?” she asks slowly.

I suddenly remember Robin knows absolutely nothing that has transpired on this ship since we departed to meet Franky. I bolt upright, ignoring the twinge of my bones shifting, and stare at her with wide eyes. “Robin, there's something you need to know.”

She furrows her brow and opens her mouth but is interrupted by Luffy. “Hey! There’s a ship coming from over there!” All of us turn the direction Luffy is pointing. Indeed, a giant Galley-La ship is headed right for us. “Ice guy!” Luffy cheers, spotting Iceberg at the front of their massive ship.

Iceberg is impassive for a moment before his painted lips break into a smile. “You really are crazy. And you got everything back from the World Government!” He calls over.

The world cracks in half.

Or at least, the Merry does. It's abrupt, and it's deafeningly loud, and it vibrates up through my bones and I feel sorrow surge up after it like there's so much soaking out of our beloved boat it has nowhere else to go but through me.

The front half of our ship breaks halfway away from the rest and dips forward into the sea like an awkward bow. Everyone on the ship but me and Robin were on that half and she catches me by the elbow when I stumble forward, a strangled gasp getting gnarled in my throat when I put pressure on my assuredly fucked ankle.

"How could the Merry fall apart all of a sudden?!" Luffy shrieks, barely managing to keep his place on deck even though he falls over.

"It isn't sudden at all! It's only natural," Sanji says roughly, also having fallen on his ass. "Merry was already deemed unfit to sail. Surely you remember that." Robin's hand squeezes onto my elbow, though she says nothing.

"But—" Luffy sputters, spinning back towards Iceberg with pure panic on his face. "Ice guy! The Going Merry is in trouble! *Do something!"* he begs. "You came just in time, aren't you all shipwrights?! Please do something! She isn't just a ship, Merry is a friend that's been with us a long time! And it was the Merry that came and saved us just now!"

Iceberg is silent for a moment. "Then it's time you let her rest. I've done everything I can." My shoulders shudder. "Right now I'm looking at a miracle. The miracle of a ship that has gone *far* past its limits. I've been a shipwright for many years, but I've never seen a pirate ship as incredible as this one." I can see the reverence and remorse in Iceberg's eyes from here. "It lived a splendid life."

Silence reigns across the water for an impossibly long moment. "...I get it," Luffy says quietly.

Getting us evacuated onto a small long boat is a simple affair. Robin half carries me, mostly supports me, through the whole trip with one arm over her shoulder and some ungraceful hopping.

We're the last to leave her, besides Luffy, and I can't help but linger with my fingers on her rails. I let my eyes catch on every indent I've left with my nails, every dent I'm responsible for when being clumsy with boxes, every scuff and every inch of chipped paint.

But we dismount all the same, one last departure from the ship we love so much.

"A viking funeral you said, right Ed? The end of a warrior?" Robin says, breaking the silence. "Since Merry is already a boat, we just need a fire, yes?"

I take a heavy breath and nod.

"I don't know if there's a Fiddlers Green for boats, but I bet that's where she'll be going. Not to worry," Sanji murmurs, lighting up a cigarette before passing his lighter to Luffy, who has somehow already procured a torch.

"What's Fiddlers Green?" Chopper asks between sniffs.

"It's a place where sailors go when they die, if they spent 50 years in service aboard a ship. There's never ending fiddle music and you can dance forever without getting tired," Sanji explains quietly.

"So — so you think the Merry will go somewhere nice where she can sail in peaceful water with nice music forever?" Chopper mumbles.

"It's a nice thought," Nami murmurs.

Luffy sets out on a separate dinghy. "Ready, everyone?" he calls back.

We all take a deep breath together. "Yeah."

“Merry. The seafloor is dark and lonely, so we’re gonna see you off!” Luffy declares. “And you’ll get to Fiesta Blue, or whatever Sanji said. Maybe it’s a good thing Usopp isn’t here. He couldn’t stand this.”

Then he lowers the torch to the point where Merry cracked wide open.

“How about it?” Zoro mutters.

“That’s not true,” Usopp, back in his Sniperking mask, responds. “We must all part someday. This is a man's farewell. I mustn’t shed a single tear. Luffy himself is ready.”

“There’s no shame in mourning, in grief,” I say firmly, already feeling the familiar tightening of my throat and burning behind my eyes. “Cry if you want to.”

We watch the fire dance across Merry’s deck, eat away at the rails, climb the mast and kiss our flag.

“You carried us for a long time. Thank you, Going Merry,” Luffy whispers.

Something cold lands on my cheek. I look up and stare into the sky as white snow floats down all around us, almost glowing as it lands and melts on the water. My fingers ghost up and over the cold wet streak down my cheek and I start crying in earnest.

A million instances of our home being *home* flash through my head like a film roll as the Merry burns bright and begins to sink into the water. “I’m sorry,” I sob, “I’m so sorry.”

“ ***I’m*** *sorry,”* Merry’s voice calls back. *“I wanted to carry you even further.”* How much remorse can a voice that’s not a voice hold? *“I’m sorry… I wanted to have adventures with you forever, but I…”*

“We’re the ones who should say sorry!” Luffy explodes, fully in tears. “I’m no good at steering, so I ran you into icebergs! And I ripped your sails! And Zoro and Sanji are stupid so they broke all kinds of things! Usopp would fix you every time but he stinks at it! We’re the ones who are sorry!”

I hunch in on myself. “I’m so so sorry! I’m sorry I didn’t try harder! I’m sorry!” I wail, fingers clenched in my hair. “I’m sorry I kept fucking it up! I’m sorry I kept letting you get hurt! I’m sorry there wasn’t a solution!”

“Even so, I was happy,” Merry says wistfully, figurehead wreathed in flame and dipping into the water. *“Thank you… for caring about me. I… was truly… happy.”*

“As if we could have done anything but love you!” I scream. I take a deep breath so I can give her my gratitude with as much force as I can. “THANK YOU! FOR EVERYTHING!”

Merry laughs — happy, sad, a little regretful. But no more words are exchanged.

The Going Merry sinks into the waves, and we’re forced to bid farewell to a dearly beloved friend.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote the last part sobbing my eyes out and listening to Wasteland, Baby! by Hozier which really made the whole experience just awful. But yeah. Of Monsters and Men, amirite?

That ship did not, in fact, carry them safe to shore.

Chapter 80: Chapter Eighty: Fruit Falls On My Head, And I Don’t Discover Anything

Chapter Summary

Everything Is Shit Except My Friendship With You - Ball Park Music

After a thorough checkup done by Chopper (my wrist was definitely broken, the ankle was only sprained by some miracle, everything else was fixable) and us being set up in the temporary Galley-La Headquarters, I get in a bed and don’t move for at least 48 hours.

Chapter Notes

This is a top tier song. Absolutely wonderful.

I wrote the wackest chapter the other day while high off my ass and I'm keeping it in this story just because I somehow wrote the most beautifully profound shit in it. Like you'll know when we get there because it's such an out of pocket chapter. Something to look forward to after last chapters moment of sadness xoxo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I sleep for an entire two days.

After a thorough checkup done by Chopper (my wrist was definitely broken, the ankle was only sprained by some miracle, everything else was fixable) and us being set up in the temporary Galley-La Headquarters, I get in a bed and don’t move for at least 48 hours.

I rise with the sun on the second day and simply sit in my provided bed for an hour just staring out the window. Merry’s absence grates on the edges of the hole she left in my heart, but I keep going. Chopper had advised I stay off my foot, but I get up to go about my business anyway.

Galley-La had provided us with clothing along with our accommodations, and I find myself in a sage green shirt with their logo on it along with some big black shorts. I pause in front of the mirror after my business in the bathroom, and stare at my face for a long second.

For convenience when dressing and cleaning the cut that's bisected my eyebrow (quarantine me who shaved a slit in it because I thought it looked cool is rolling in their grave) my bangs have been pulled up into a bun, so for the first time in forever my whole forehead is on display.

I kind of look like a pineapple. But a very sexy pineapple.

With that lovely thought, I head out from our room in search of someone who can help me find what I need. Luckily enough, the first person I see is Iceberg.

He's walking down the wall with a large roll of paper under one arm, and a big mug of steaming coffee in his hand. He blinks in surprise as he sees me, but settles into a smile easily enough. "Oh my, Detective Domino. I see you're finally up."

I wave him off. "Please, just Ed is fine. I have a question, if you don't mind. Are you busy?" I inquire.

He shakes his head. "Oh, no. Please ask away."

"I was wondering if you had a Devil Fruit Encyclopedia around. I don't really know how widely distributed they are," I ask, adjusting my cast clad wrist at my side. I'm like 90% sure I don't even need it anymore, I just don't want Chopper to maul me if he sees me without it.

He blinks a couple times. "I had one in my study. It's anyone's guess if it survived the fire, but what with Aqua Laguna hitting fairly quickly after the inferno started and the room itself being waterproof it has pretty good chances," he explains. "I could take you by, see if we can't salvage it."

I give him a smile. “Should you be doing so much moving? I’d wager you aren’t supposed to be out of bed yet,” I tease.

He chuckles. “Should *you?”*

On cue I hear Chopper’s voice from inside the room. “Where’s Ed? Are they in the bathroom? Did someone help them walk?!” he shrieks.

“Yeah alright fair let’s go,” I say quickly, looping one arm through his and pulling him towards the exit.

He laughs and shakes his head, dropping his roll of paper and coffee mug onto a table as we pass it.

Outside, we can already hear the sounds of construction happening throughout the city. The ruins of the manor are all around us, and he starts leading me through some of the rubble until we come to the building propper.

It’s definitely worse for wear since I last saw it. A lot of it is destroyed or missing, and what is left is still covered in scorch marks. But still, he takes me past people poking around the rubble who greet us both happily, then into the burnt remains of the manor itself.

It gets better the further in we get. It’s clear where the fire started and where it didn’t manage to reach before Aqua Laguna extinguished it, and when we reach the study, there’s only the barest trace of damage.

“Seems we’re in luck,” he offers, opening the doors and gesturing me in. His study is more of a library with a desk, all things considered. The room is dark, only half of it illuminated from the open doors until Iceberg goes further inside and starts removing storm covers from the windows.

As the room fills with natural light, I'm left in awe of its simple elegance. It's like a much less garish version of the waiting room I found myself in inside the Tower of Law. There's a glass case mounted on what wall full of what looks like collectable coins that I find myself examining.

"I see you've found the coins," Iceberg says, coming up behind me.

"What are they for?" I ask, scanning through them and reading off the years.

"Commemorative coins for Aqua Laguna. It's a tradition that's been going strong for years upon years, preceding even my tenure as mayor. This one here is this year's," he explains, opening the glass of the case and pulling out the last coin before handing it to me.

I run my fingers over the stamped image of a wave, large and half obscuring a building. "And they're different each year?" I ask idly, flipping it through my knuckles the way my sister taught me to do.

"Yes. There's actually a competition put on for the artists of the city. They submit ideas and the public votes for their favourite," he says, closing the cabinet. "Why don't you hold onto that? I'd say you've earned it, and I can get another to replace it. The craftsman is a nice fellow, he's getting up in his years and this has been his passion for a vast majority of them."

I blink up at him. "Oh. Thank you," I grin, closing my fist around it before squirreling it away in a pocket. I wander down the shelves, skimming titles until I come to something I know. "You have Sora Warrior of the Sea?" I blurt, plucking the first volume out.

Iceberg glances over. "Oh my. Yes, I forgot we had those. Paulie had a bit of a phase. They're just commercial copies, feel free to take as many as you want. Not like I'll be reading them."

I immediately take all the volumes he has off the shelf. Mine.

Iceberg meanders over to another shelf before plucking a large book off. He hands it to me and I take it over to his deck to lay down and flip through. I sift through the pages, some with names and no pictures, some with no pictures and descriptions, some with nothing but pictures or names with nothing else at all.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Iceberg asks curiously.

"I ate one up in the Tower of Law," I say offhandedly. Iceberg chokes. "I've got an idea of what it does, but I'd like some guidance and shit."

"I'd ask, but I don't think I want to know," he mutters under his breath.

I gasp as I finally find the correct page. "The Turn Turn Fruit," I read aloud, tracing the image of the yellow peach with my fingers. "A little spot on if you ask me."

"What does it say about it?" Iceberg questions leaning over.

"Uh… 'It's a Paramythia that gives its user the ability to turn things on a large or small scale. Its effects can only be administered through touch, and can affect things both theoretical and physical. Its most famous and perhaps grandest application is seen in its previous user, Eibara Bishop. She supposedly turned an entire island upside down and a whole society adapted to it, though these rumors were unconfirmed. Upon her death, all mention of the island disappeared and ruins never recovered.'" I recite.

I stare down at the page for a second, looking at the name of the person who's legacy I just inherited.

"This thematically has nothing to do with me! Wait a fucking — I've read about that island in the book I gave Robin!"

Iceberg gives me a look. "You are so strange."

I toss my hands up.

_____

“Ed!” Chopper shrieks upon seeing me on our way back to our temporary quarters. He’s walking with Robin, and they both have bags over their shoulders. “I told you not to walk on that foot! Are you ok?! Are you in pain?!”

I snicker and unhook my arm from Iceberg’s to go sweep him up in a one armed hug. “I’m fine! Like I told you before I passed out, I’m like basically fully healed from sleep healing magic or some shit. Besides, Iceberg would have helped me if anything went wrong,” I sooth, smooshing our cheeks together.

“Iceberg shouldn’t be up either! You’re both irresponsible!” Chopper responds shrilly.

Iceberg surreptitious shuffles further to the side and ducks behind the stack of comics he’s carrying for me.

Robin laughs and shakes her head. “Calm down, Doctor. With your expert care I’m sure Ed is perfectly fine.”

Chopper all but melts in my arms. “Shut up, jerk! I’m not gonna stop being mad just because you said something nice!” he says, entirely unconvincingly.

“Ok, ok! Inside, inside!” I cackle, jaunting back into the building. Chopper squeals as he’s brought along under my arm and I burst into the room by kicking the door open (with my good foot, promise). “Guess who’s back, bitches!”

“We’re back!” Chopper laughs as I flip him upside down. “I checked on the Franky Families injuries and didn’t let Robin out of my sight once!” he announces, snapping into an upside

down salute.

“Good work, Chopper!” Sanji answers, saluting back.

“You don’t have to worry, I’m not going anywhere,” Robin chuckles.

“Look! My tangerine trees are back!” Nami cheers, dancing around her trees and a pile of our stuff that was confiscated from the inn. “Now we can continue our journey!”

“Yeah!” Chopper cheers back as I put him down on his feet.

The door is suddenly kicked open, again, as Franky and the square sisters burst into the room and strike poses. “Hey! Are you guys feelin’ super?! Ah, wait you’re not all here. Whatever! I need to talk to you!” he shouts.

“Franky!” I yell, a big grin on my face as I basically throw myself on him for a hug.

“Little bro! Great news, I’ve finally got those materials we talked about, and I have a question for you,” Franky says, sitting down on the ground with a serious look as we separate. “You know the story surrounding that wood we both wanted?”

I nod. “Wood of the Jewel Adam tree. Can’t be chopped down, nigh indestructible, nearly one of a kind. Unending wars are fought over it. And,” I flash a sly smile, “it’s the wood that was used to build the Oro Jackson.”

There’s a couple strangled gasps from my fellows, but Franky just laughs. “Sure was! I swore off building ships a long time ago, but I always wanted to follow in the footsteps of my mentor. When I promised to draw you up plans, I gotta confess my mind was going a mile a minute. And what you said…” he trails off.

“What I said?” I prompt.

“About needing a ship of dreams. That right there? That’s *my* dream. To build that ship of dreams with the Adam’s wood that can overcome the ocean!” he burst out. “So now that I’ve got the wood, and the blueprints are done, I’ve got one question left for you!” He takes a deep breath and slams his fists into the ground. “Once I finish it, can you please sail on the ship I made?!”

A smile fights its way across my face so hard it makes my cheek throb under its bandage, though I’m certain it’s already healed.

“You mean you’re gonna *give* us your greatest ship?” Sanji chokes out.

“HUH?! HUH?!” Chopper gawks.

“That’s right. Nothing would make me happier than seeing people I like sailing my ship. Plus it was basically a commission, y’all paid for the materials already,” Franky says with a grin. “The Oro Jackson is the only ship to sail all the way around the world. Like little bro said, it was made of Adam’s wood. The ship I’ll build you will be just as good — if not better!”

“You and Tom really are just the same, ngagaga!” Kokoro, who I hadn’t even realized was in the room until now, cackles. “Craftsman to the bone!”

Franky’s smile widens even more, if that’s possible. “Yeah. At last I think I finally understand the pride Tom felt when he died.”

“You’re the best, Franky! We’ll be happy to take your ship! Thank you!” Nami cries, hugging onto her trees again.

“Now we can move onto the next island!” Sanji whoops.

“This is great! Luffy, we’re getting a ship!” Chopper cheers, bouncing over to where Luffy is, what the fuck, shovelling food into his mouth even as he snores.

I smile contently at the scene. Then… Oh boy. I actually manage to remember something. “Hey gang, move away from that wall,” I suggest, vaguely gesturing toward the one I mean. “Also like… don’t pick a fight?”

I’m met with confused noises and faces. “What? Why?” Sanij asks, doing what I said anyway.

The wall explodes like I fucking summoned him. “OH HOLY FUCK!” I yelp, ducking and covering my head as the bricks rain down.

“What’s going on?!” Franky shouts.

“Who’re you?!” Sanji yells at the large figure stomping through the destroyed wall.

“So you’re the Strawhat Pirates…” Garp the motherfucking Fist mutters as he enters our temporary living quarters. “I’ve got some men I want a couple of you to meet.” I watch his eyes catch onto Luffy, still asleep at the table. In a flash he’s across the room and clocks him solidly across the head, breaking our fucking table in the process. “Wake up, Luffy!”

Luffy rolls around on the ground clutching his bleeding head. “OW! THAT HURT!”

“What do you mean it *hurt?!”* Sanji yells, dropping into a defensive position. “You’re made of *rubber!”*

“You can’t block a Fist of Love,” Garp says with a giant grin, slipping off his dog hat. “You seem to be causing a lot of trouble, huh Luffy?”

Luffy stares at him in absolute horror. “G — G — G — GRAMPS?!” he shrieks at the top of his lungs.

“GRAMPS?!” everyone repeats.

“You broke our wall!” I shout incredulously. “We use that!”

Everyone pauses to stare at me for a long second.

“Aren’t you that kid that used my name to trick an officer into thinking you’re a Marine?” Garp asks, pointing at me with a furrowed eyebrow.

I throw my hands up. “I did no such thing! I named dropped you *once* to some rat bastard to stop him from breaking the damn law and I got a fucking bounty for it!” I yell. “That little shit started it! And I never said I was a Marine!” At least I didn’t at the time of the incident. I’ve done it plenty since then.

“Is *Garp the Fist* your fucking grandpa?!” Sanji interrupts with a yell, gaping at Luffy.

“Don’t provoke him! He’ll kill you!” Luffy exclaims. “I don’t know how many times he almost killed me as a kid!”

“Don’t say that, you’ll give people the wrong impression,” Garp grumbles. “I did throw you down that ravine, and into a jungle at night, and strapped you to that balloon… But all to make you stronger!”

Dear fucking lord.

“So many things about Luffy suddenly make sense,” Sanji mumbles.

Garp huffs. “In the end I entrusted you and Ace to a friend for training, but the second I took my eyes off ya… I TRAINED YOU TO BE STRONG MARINES!”

“I ALWAYS TOLD YOU I WANTED TO BE A PIRATE!” Luffy shouts.

“THIS IS ALL THE REDHEAD IDIOTS FAULT!” Garp shouts back.

“SHANKS SAVED MY LIFE! DON’T TALK SHIT ABOUT HIM!” is Luffy’s response.

Garp grabs him by the collar. “HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO YOUR GRAMPS IN THAT TONE OF VOICE?!”

“I’M SORRY!” Luffy yelps.

They both promptly fall asleep, Luffy suspended in the air and Grap with his fist half cocked back.

“This is fascinating,” I murmur.

“They fell asleep?!” everyone shouts.

“What am I supposed to do here?! I’ve never been in a situation like this before!” Franky hisses.

Garp blinks awake, notices Luffy is still sleeping, and promptly starts another yelling session, complete with punches. It eventually devolves back to them fighting about Shanks which just devolves into Garp spouting off information I told Luffy the first time we met which devolves into Garp getting mad Luffy only half remembers half this shit from someone who isn’t him. It’s all rather dramatic.

Then the fighting starts outside. “What’s going on out there?” Garp calls out the hole in the wall.

“It’s Pirate Hunter Zoro, sir,” a tall man in a grey suit and fedora answers. Oh my god it’s fucking Bogard. Oh my god.

“One of Luffy’s men, huh? Sure is a lively one,” Garp muses. “You two! Try and stop him!” he barks. I peek out the hole and oh — there they are.

“Yes, sir!” two familiar strapping young gentlemen respond.

I feel a wicked grin climb up my face and in a move that I contribute more to my competitive streak and vindictive nature than anything else, I vault the rubble of the wall.

“This one’s mine! Payback time, nerd!” I holler, throwing myself at the stupid blond who’s crouched low with a pair of kukri knives out and facing the direction Zoro is making noise from. I slap my hand into the ground near his feet and try to envision an axis just beyond him to turn from.

I (*gear, vinyls, galaxies—)* turn the ground with him on it and as he stumbles, I stick my leg out and trip him. He’s unceremoniously tackled to the ground as I take the opportunity to lunge at him.

He yelps and manages to make the full twist around just in time to come face to face with my pistol, the one modified from the original, and blinks wide at me from behind his dumb wraparound visor sunglasses.

“This feels familiar, huh?” I muse with a smirk, watching Helmeppo gulp and drop both his knives.

Garp bursts out laughing behind us. “You two were no match at all!”

“You’re so strong, just like how I remember you! I yield,” a voice both familiar and not says from behind me. I glance over my shoulder and watch the pink haired boy pick himself up from where Luffy had him pinned and brush off his clothing. “Luffy, Ed, Zoro, long time no see. Don’t you recognize me?”

“Who are you?” Luffy asks, sounding super confused.

I abandon my hostage to jump at the boy with a giant smile. “Coby, my darling my dear! Look at you, you aren’t shaped like a weird mushroom anymore!” I cheer, shaking him around. He laughs semi nervously and hesitantly pats me on the back.

“Coby?! Like *our* friend Coby?! The short one?!” Luffy gapes.

“Yup, that Coby! Useless crybaby Coby!” he says cheerfully.

“You’re actually that Coby? The hell are you doing on the Grand Line?” Zoro asks, suddenly showing up beside us.

“We saw you in the newspaper, we knew you were on the Grand Line,” I correct. “We didn’t know we’d be getting a visit however, you filthy rapscallion. Keeping secrets, are we?” I tease.

Coby starts frantically waving his hands. “No no no! I mean it’s not like I could really contact you, and either way it wouldn't be proper with you being pirates and me not even being a commissioned officer yet—” he rambles.

I burst out laughing and poke him on his cross shaped scar. “Cobes, love, I’m fucking with you.”

His face goes bright pink to match his hair and he ruffles it at the back of his head. “Ahhah, I knew that. Anyway,” he snaps up into a perfect salute, “we wouldn’t be where we are today if it weren't for you guys!”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Helmeppo grumbles, finally pushing himself off the ground. Poor schmuck must be dying of embarrassment, I took him down with absolutely no fight at all.

“A lot happened and we ended up being trained by Vice Admiral Garp himself!” Coby explains cheerfully.

“Your growth spurt is crazy, I didn’t even recognize you!” Luffy awes while I start leading Coby back towards the big ol’ hole in our wall, completely ignoring Helmeppo.

“You must be tired after everything that happened,” Coby says with a sheepish laugh.

“Nah, we haven’t seen each other in so long, we should have a party!” Luffy cheers.

“Wait a — I am right here! I’m here too!” Helmeppo screeches.

The group halts and slowly turns to him. “Who the hell is this guy?” Zoro grunts.

“No idea. Who’re you?” Luffy demands.

“He’s the onion haired son of a bitch who crucified Zoro to a post and held me at gunpoint. You punched him in the face, remember? Twice, actually,” I remind him. “That Captain from Shell Town’s son. The nepo baby.”

“Oh that guy,” Zoro and Luffy say in unison, looks of disdain tossed at him as he starts crying beneath his visor.

“Augh, I can’t forgive them, Coby!” he shrieks.

“Sorry, Helmeppo. You just have to accept the past,” Coby apologizes.

“Now then. Fix the wall,” Garp orders his men. He’s immediately berated at all angles until he’s been corralled into fixing the wall himself, with his subordinates only helping to clean up the rubble and hand him materials.

“You’re gramps really is an important person, isn’t he?” Sanji mumbles out the side of his mouth while we re-enter the room.

“I don’t know much about his work,” Luffy replies simply.

“By the way, Luffy. I heard you met your dad,” Garp pipes up, pausing in hammering nails into the wall for a moment.

Luffy blinks a couple times. “My dad? What do you mean, my dad? I have a dad?”

“Baby, tell me honestly you did not just ask if you have a dad,” I mumble into my hands.

“What? He didn’t tell you? He said he saw you off at Loguetown!” Garp continues, sticking a finger up his nose. Luffy really is his spitting image.

“Loguetown..?” Zoro mutters.

“Your dad was there, Luffy?” Sanji asks.

“Who is he?” Nami questions.

“Who’s my dad?” Luffy parrots.

“You’re fathers name is Monkey D. Dragon, the revolutionary,” Garp says nonchalantly.

The entire area descends into chaos. Marines start crying, there’s wailing in the streets, enough screaming that everyone in a hundred mile radius probably knows what’s happening, and no small amount of passing out.

I play my part. I let my jaw drop and expression twist. “Sorry, I think I just hallucinated. One more time for the criminally insane in the back?!”

“Why’s everyone acting so weird?” Luffy asks, side eyeing me.

“Do you actually not know who Dragon is?!” Sanji screeches.

“Your father is a really dangerous man!” Nami shrieks.

“It makes total sense, don’t get me wrong. With the way you’re turning out we should really start worrying about who your mom is,” I snicker. “Anyone else think it’s a little weird Garp has managed to raise nothing but Marine hating power houses?”

Also hold up wait, Dragon *told* Garp he saw Luffy at Loguetown? Do these motherfuckers just casually chat over tea right under the WG’s nose? I respect the hustle.

“I have a mom?” Luffy asks, confused by the prospect. I love this man with my entire heart. “Hey, who’s Dragon? Robin?”

“Er — where do I even start?” Robin mumbles awkwardly, kind of side-eyeing Garp. “So pirates don’t usually oppose the Marines directly, our confrontations happen in a more…

circumstantial way.”

“The Revolutionary Army said fuck that, fuck these bitches, and fuck the boots they kiss,” I add. “Dragon is the guy leading them, he’s the most wanted man in the world. For now,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows at Luffy.

“The Revolutionary Army is a widespread organization. Their ideology has caused a lot of nations to rebel against the World Government, some of them to even collapse,” Robin continues. “No one really knows much about Dragon, but…”

Garp finally clues onto what he’s done. “Oh. Whoops, I probably said too much,” he laughs. “Pretend I didn’t say that.”

I take a deep breath, and scream in unison with every other person within earshot.

“WHAT?!”

_____

“Excuse me, Garp, sir? I was wondering if I could have a word,” I say politely, rocking back and forth beside him as he nears completion on the wall. Half the crew has already split off to go to the pool or something, and a vast majority of the Marines have fucked off to wherever.

Garp side eyes me but continues hammering. “Sure kid, speak your mind.”

I suck on my teeth for a moment. “So not that this is gonna endear you to me at all, but we kinda hijacked the sea train to get to Enies Lobby.”

Garp pauses. “...Is your plan to just tell me what kind of crimes you’ve committed to see how many it’ll take for me to arrest ya?”

“No no no, nothing like that,” I say quickly. “I just, er — that is…”

“C’mon, spit it out,” Garp grunts.

“Captain Ship Cutter T-Bone,” I blurt. “He — uh… is he alright? I mean did he and his men get recovered in the aftermath of the fight?”

Garp fully stops hammering to turn to me. He’s got this weird look on his face and I shift my eyes off to the side and start rocking harder on the balls of my feet. “You want to know if Ship Cutter T-Bone is alright?” he asks slowly.

I nod, a little nervously. “Yeah. He, um, well we met on the train. And he was kind, and a gentleman, and I kind of threw him to the metaphorical wolves, and by that I mean Zoro and the ocean, so I just… I dunno. Want to know if he made it out alright,” I say awkwardly.

Garp just stares at me for a long hard second. I twitch and fiddle with my fingers, looking anywhere but right at him. Then he burst into laughter, shocking me so bad I nearly fall over.

“Yeah, kid. Ship Cutter T-Bone is alright. Him and a vast majority of his men were recovered after the fight,” he says, not unkindly. “Can I ask why a reprehensible reprobate like yourself wants to know? Real answer.”

I huff out a breath. “I just wanted to make sure I didn’t accidentally kill the guy, sending him off towards our swordsman unprepared,” I say petulantly.

Garp laughs again, boisterous and loud like a whip. “You’re something else! Caring about a Marine after singing the praises of the Revs right to my face. If nothing else, I respect your glib!”

“I’m a multifaceted person. I can like people from both,” I grumble. “But, ah, I had another question.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Well, go on. Don’t get shy now.”

“Was Nezumi allowed to keep his post after the Arlong incident?” I demand. That makes him pause again. “I don’t care much for laws because I’m a pirate. He didn’t care because he was a scumbag. There’s a lot of failing in the system you uphold, but I hope keeping a person like that in power wasn’t one of them.”

He regards me for a moment. “Nezumi was demoted. You and my idiot grandson knocked two Captains out of the East Blue and their standing with the Marines. If you’re proud of that sort of thing.”

My shoulders relax from a tension I didn’t even know they were holding. “Oh. That’s good,” I sigh, ceasing my rocking to just stare at the ground.

“You know,” Garp starts, “perhaps they’re in need of a kind and gentlemanly Captain down in those parts. Shell Town is still in temporary custody of a Marine I’ve been meaning to move out here, might as well give those folks someone I know for sure won’t screw them over.”

My head shoots up and I blink rapidly at him. “You would — I mean… You’d…”

“Bwahaha! Don’t get your tongue tied over one good deed, and don’t get it twisted! This is something that’ll be good for the East Blue, Captain T-Bone is a fine navy man and I take care of my home sea.” Then he narrows his eyes at me. “But if I ever find out you actually are impersonating one of my officers, we’ll be having words.”

I squeak and snap into a salute before I can help it. “Sir, yes, sir!”

“Bwahaha! Don’t get so formal all of a sudden!”

Chapter End Notes

That last scene is a lil somethin' somethin' partly suggested from one of you little shits on Tumblr. Bless you and your mind.

Catch me in the corner making up more obscure dumb shit like commemorative coins. You love to see it.

Is anyone mad about the book thing? Any of you going back to the beginning of the Skypiea arc to check if I'm right? Losers. Imagine not being omnipotent. (It's chapter 41 and 43 if you actually want to check lmao.)

Oh also more Ed art because SOMEBODY can't stop ruining their outfits. Like I said, this is so far the saga with the most costume changes.

Chapter 81: Chapter Eighty One: Caught Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea

Chapter Summary

Spaceman - The Killers

“I’M GONNA DO A FLIP!” I announce, running down the walkway at the pool and attempting (*attempting,* because I never learned how to actually do it) to flip into the water.

Chapter Notes

I'm knee deep in writing Thriller Bark and on a totally unrelated note does anyone know anything about writing musicals. Because I think there should have been a musical number where Brook explained everything he knows about Thriller Bark. Just... marinate on that.

EVERYONE IGNORE I ACCIDENTALLY POSTED THIS EARLY I DIDN'T NOTICE LMAOOOOO

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garp’s exit is as punchy as his entrance, and soon we’re left with just Coby and Helmeppo. The rest of the remaining crew go back into our repaired room, even Zoro deciding to leave the reunion to just me, Luffy and the navy boys.

“So you get to ride one of those fancy seastone lined ships yet?” I ask, swinging my legs over the side of the rubble we’re seated on.

“Yeah actually, we went for a trip through the Calm Belt in one. It was crazy being in there and not being bothered by Sea Kings at all,” Coby chirps.

“So you can just cross into the Grand Line without taking Reverse Mountain? But that’s cheating!” Luffy whines.

“You only think that because you thought us chilling on the nose of a Sea King the size of New fucking Mexico was fun,” I grumble.

“When it comes to technology, Vegapunk is number one. The seastone lined ships are only a tiny piece of what he’s come up with,” Coby says brightly.

“He really is. And when it comes to Devil Fruits? He discovered how they confer their powers and even invented a way for inanimate objects to eat them. It was his biggest project from last year,” Helmeppo gushes.

“Oh! You’ll never believe this; I’ve got a devil fruit now!” I announce.

“What? Really?!” all three boys shout.

“Wait, Luffy, why don’t you know that?” Coby squawks.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it!” he whines.

“It’s a recent thing,” I supply. “Like a ‘it only happened when we were wrecking house on Enies Lobby’ thing. I swear I already told the crew though; I was only mildly high on pain medication when we got here.”

“What is it? What can you do?” Luffy asks excitedly, tucking his legs under himself and leaning forward.

I smirk and smack my hand onto the rubble chunk he’s sitting on. Let’s see if what I did earlier works…

I reach out and try to get the weird intangible feel of the stone he's sitting on and it comes surprisingly easy with actual contact. Then it's just *(gears, vinyls, galaxies—)* and he's rotating on the rubble like the plate of a microwave.

"Woah! Holy shit, that's awesome!" Luffy cheers, trying and failing to stay still while turning like a record on a turntable. Lazy susan type thing. Heh.

"I can turn shit. You should have seen me in action on the Tower of Law — I ran up a fucking wall then launched myself and fell all the way to the Bridge of Hesitation," I say proudly. For it being the first time I ever used my Devil Fruit, I think it was pretty damn impressive.

Wait — oh I just had a horrible idea. "Luffy I'm gonna do something weird, don't get mad!" I blurt, smacking my hand onto his back and trying the funniest thing I can think of.

"What do you—" Luffy cuts himself off. His face goes through several shades of red then an alarming green at a rapid pace. Then he's flinging himself over the back of the rocks with a dreadful retching sound.

I stare proudly off into the distance. "I just turned your stomach. I am incredible," I whisper.

"That's *so* freaking awesome," Luffy groans, leaning back over with a queasy smile.

"That's amazing, Ed. There's a lot of really amazing people in this world," Coby breathes out, looking amused and a little grossed out. "I've seen a lot since I've been out to sea. I didn't realize how small my world was until you two burst out of that barrel. If you hadn't, I'd probably still be swabbing the deck of Alvida's ship."

Luffy starts laughing at that. "Oh right, Alvida! Everytime I think about why you were on that ship I crack up!"

It's wonderful to just shoot the shit and laugh with a person from so early on in our journey. The subtle differences and the obvious increase in Coby's confidence are both lovely to witness, and a little bittersweet when I think of whence we came.

He isn't that scared, weak little boy anymore, and I'm not running from my responsibilities anymore. It's weird how the world has a way of defining such things to us in moments like these.

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"What? You're leaving already? You should share a meal with us!" Luffy says disappointedly, swaying back and forth on his feet as we stand beside the repaired wall. Zoro is leaning on the window sill and Sanji and Chopper are both out here with us.

"We're supposed to be enemies, we can't be too friendly with each other," Coby says kindly. "You know what the second half of the Grand Line is called?"

"The New World," Luffy responds. Oh, I'm touched he remembered that from one of our first conversations, way back when all we had was a craptastic dinghy and each other.

"Right!" Coby grins. "There's a new era coming, and the people who can guide it are gathering on the oceans! The one who can master those oceans will become King of the Pirates!"

Luffy's smile grows larger and sharper, spine straightening like he's stretching to fill the air around the title in a way only he can.

"Luffy! Let's meet again there! I *will* be the one to catch you! I'll train to become even stronger so I can do that!" His determined gaze switches to me. "O — one day I'll become an Admiral! A decent one, with my own justice!"

Then he blinks, clocking onto what he just said, and that he said it out loud. He drops onto the ground clutching his head making embarrassed sounds.

“Coby!” Luffy proclaims, slicing right through his self loathing fest. “You’re going to fight me, right? So keep that attitude. The next time we meet, I’m going to be stronger too. Much stronger!”

“Cobes,” I pipe up, “there’s tons of Marines who would make good Admirals. Among their ranks, good men are in much shorter supply. You are first on a very short list of people I would be proud to see take that mantle, and I have no doubt we’ll get to see you wear it one day.” I give him my biggest and warmest smile and he promptly bursts into tears.

“What’s this? Looks like you’re still a crybaby, Coby,” Zoro muses with a smirk, leaning forward out the window.

Coby drops into a bow right there in the grass. “I’m so glad I saw you three here today!” Then he explodes up into an action pose. “We’ll become much, much stronger! Let’s meet again in the New World!”

“You guys better get ready for us! I’ll scare your socks off!” Helmeppo yells with him, following Coby’s lead with the pose before they’re both taking their leave, whooping and hollering all the way.

“Looks like you guys are planting the seeds for some pretty strong enemies in the future,” Zoro chuckles.

“If Coby says he can do it, he can do it,” Luffy says with complete certainty.

“Of course he can,” I murmur, watching them leave with a content smile. “He’s carrying my hopes for the future of the whole navy. He simply can’t fail.”

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We party, because it's what we deserve. After our pals departure, it's straight to the giant fucking pool behind Galley-La headquarters for a barbeque pool party, complete with all of our allies from Enies Lobby and top notch cooking.

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"I'M GONNA DO A FLIP!" I announce, running down the walkway at the pool and attempting *(attempting,* because I never learned how to actually do it) to flip into the water.

"WHAT?! WAIT ED YOU'RE A HAMMER—"

Nami's voice cuts out as I splash into the water. And then her words register. And then I'm straight up sinking.

I mean it's a little funny because of course I forgot immediately, but mostly it's scary. It isn't like being plunged into a cold lake and all of your muscles locking up, common Canadian L, it's all of my muscles suddenly loosening and being hit with the crash after ten coffee's all at once.

There's a very long second of straight adrenaline panic before a pair of arms hook under mine and I'm being pulled back above the surface. I gasp in air and grab onto the hands clutching me in a vice grip. "Oh sweet fuck! Don't let me do that again!"

"Darling, I mean this in the nicest way possible, that was incredibly stupid," Sanji says gently, hauling me out of the water and setting me on the ground.

A towel is dropped heavy on my head and then someone is aggressively rubbing it into my hair and basically wrestling me to the ground to dry me off. I shriek and start trying to bat whoever it is away.

I finally manage to get my head out of the towel and see Luffy's grinning face as he throws himself back into the wrestling full force. I manage to get one leg over his side and we start rolling, both cackling like mad while we go.

Our friends yelling doesn't even register until I'm once again being submerged in the water, much more unexpectedly this time.

Sanji fishes both of us out again and I really can't help but laugh.

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"Say Paulie, are you the way that you are because you've never known the touch of a woman, or are you just a prude because you can be?" I ask with sincere curiosity.

"EXCUSE ME?!" Paulie hacks out, choking on his drink. "That is not at all appropriate you — you *miscreant—"*

"You know, you really are so cute. I'm a little sad we can't snatch you up and take you with us," I say in complete dismay.

"There is something completely wrong with you and I think you need to seek help," Paulie wheezes out.

I pout and sigh longingly. "If I weren't chained to piracy…"

Paulie takes a giant step backwards. "What does that mean?!"

I just smile at him with a dreamy distant look.

“WHAT DOES THAT *MEAN?!”*

———

“Hi! You’re Oimo and Kashii, right?” I call up to the pair of giants.

“That’s us! Who might you be?” the one on the left, Oimo, laughs back.

“I’m Ed! I wanted to apologize for crashing the train into you!” I holler, hands cupped around my mouth so they can hear me with the distance and the sounds of the party.

Kashii’s massive hand swoops down and scoops me up, depositing me on Oimo’s shoulder while he laughs as well. “No need for apologies, little guy! If you're here it’s because we’re on the same team!”

I give them both beaming smiles. “Neat. So you’re friends of Dory and Brogy, yeah? Crewmates of theirs?”

Both of them blink. “So you know them too?! Just like that masked fella!”

I snicker. “Yup! We met them on Little Garden. Now I was wondering if you could tell me about Elbaf…”

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“Sniperking!” I cheer, hooking my arm around the neck of the masked hero. “So glad you could make it!”

Sniperking laughs nervously. “Of course! I wouldn't miss it for the world — Usopp sends his regards, of course.”

I hum softly and pull him closer. “Alright. Say, Sniperking, do you have a plan for after this?”

He freezes against me. “Er — go back to where I’m staying and sleep..?” he squeaks, making it very obvious he knows what I meant and is unwilling to think about it.

“Of course,” I acquiesce. He relaxes minutely. “But you should know, we would all welcome a conversation. Zoro will be a bitch about it, but he’s a bitch about everything, so that shouldn’t be what deters you from trying to patch things up,” I say quietly, letting the din of the party mask my words.

He jerks slightly away from me but I don’t let him go far. “They won’t want me back,” he whispers, “and I don’t want another yelling match.”

I lean my forehead onto where one of his mask spire things broke off. “Of course we all want you back. And sometimes yelling is a necessary step in moving forward. If you’d like to settle our differences in another way, you have to take the initiative and *do it.”*

He hisses out a breath. “I don’t know if we can move past this. What I did…” he murmurs.

“Your worth doesn’t equate to a boat or your usefulness,” I interrupt, not unkindly. Usopp flinches anyways. “You need to apologize because you said some really fucked up shit and you really hurt us. But… I’m gonna go first, yeah? I’m sorry if anything I ever did actually made you feel like I could replace your position in the crew. I can’t.”

He sniffs from under the mask. “I don’t actually think that. It was just an excuse because I was hurting, and it wasn’t fair of me to take it out on you,” he whispers, so quiet I almost lose it.

“Thank you, Usopp,” I say warmly, squeezing him into my side. “Now you just gotta apologize to everyone else. You gotta work this part out on your own, ok? I love you.”

I press a firm kiss into his hair, then push him off back into the crowd.

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When I spot Robin off in the corner of the party looking shaken the fuck up, I know what’s happened, so I do what I do best. I shimmy over, grab her by the hand and flash her a million watt smile. “Robin! Come and dance with me!”

Her panicked expression melts like warm butter. “Oh, of course Ed.”

I pull her into the mess of people as the band that came from god knows where strike up something new and jiggy. I slowly guide her through a simple six step swing style until she gets the hang of it, then we’re just laughing while we spin through the crowd.

“Do I need to be worried about what just happened?” I ask casually.

Robin doesn’t miss a single step. “No. I think it’s fine.” She waits a beat as we go through another small spin. “I think I’m ok,” she says, small smile in place and sounding completely genuine.

“Well shit. Now how will I console you? You don’t need consolin,.” I complain.

Robin laughs. “Sorry, maybe next time.”

Luffy dashes past us with a maniacal laugh, arms full of meat skewers before he’s pursued by a screaming and fuming Sanji.

Robin chuckles again. “This is mine,” she whispers.

I hum, cocking my head. “What is?”

“This. I get to have this and be happy. You’re *my* crew. We both get to have this,” she says, quiet like a secret and with a smile that could direct planes down a runway.

I abandon dancing to hug her around the middle as hard as I can. “I love you so fucking much I don’t even have the worlds,” I choke out, trying not to burst into tears in the middle of the fucking party.

She laughs again and hugs me back. I think this is the most I’ve heard her laugh, maybe ever. “I love you too,” she says fondly. “Thank you, again.”

“Nah,” I sigh, leaning into her warmth. “Thank *you.”*

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The party for once doesn’t end with us strewn about in a haphazard mess, but with us returning to our room at an almost reasonable hour. Almost.

My ankle had started smarting after an ill-advised jump off a table (I seriously thought I could nail that flip, I could not) so Sanji valiantly volunteered to carry me to bed.

Unsurprisingly, even after months of sharing a single bathroom on a relatively small ship, we are no better at sharing or organizing ourselves than we’ve ever been. I get first dibs through the power of Sanji favouritism and the injured victim card.

Sanji still insists on carrying me to my bed like royalty once Nami is replacing me in the loo, and I don’t refuse because I’m not an idiot. Today has been fucking tiring, especially since I

still don't feel 100%. So I'm pretty much dozing off even before all the room's occupants get settled.

A weight settles in behind me and I turn around to wrap my arms around Luffy without even having to think about it. "Hi," I mumble sleepily. "You feel ok?"

"Yeah, I feel good," Luffy hums back, nudging me until he can get his cheek against the top of my head.

"That's good. It's been a rough week," I murmur, sinking into the surprisingly comfortable mattress.

"Goodnight, Ed," Luffy mumbles into my hair.

"Goodnight, Luffy," I mumble back.

"Goodnight, Ed, Nami and Robin," Sanji coos from somewhere in the dark room.

"Goodnight, Sanji," we all sound back.

"Goodnight, Robin," Chopper pipes up.

"Goodnight, Doctor," she responds with an airy giggle.

"Goodnight, Zoro," I add.

"Shut the fuck up and sleep," he grumbles back.

“Bitch,” me and several other people chorus.

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“They’re finally writing about what happened,” Zoro announces in the morning, flipping through the newspaper. “There’s no mention of the Franky Family’s involvement in here at all.”

“Really? After all the trouble they caused?” Sanji frowns and turns to Luffy. “Did your grandpa pull some strings and say they were just innocent bystanders or something?”

“I don’t think he knows how to do complicated stuff like that,” Luffy says around a donut.

“What Luffy said,” Nami and Chopper both agree, waving their hands.

Sanji just shrugs. “Either way, we should be happy. *We’re* already pirates, but it would have sucked if they had been forced to go on the run.”

“Yeah sure, but they’re talking trash about *us,”* Zoro complains. “It says we declared war on the government! It even blames us for destroying the island! We’re getting pinned with everything because *someone,”* he shoots me a pointed look, “killed our scapegoat.” His face curls up into a satisfied smile while he snickers. “Guess our bounties are going up again.”

“Ooh! Will I get a bounty too?” Chopper asks, eyes wide and whimsical.

“You might. But I’m more likely to get one! I’ll be an up and coming rising star!” Sanji says cockily.

“Why are you happy about this?! Are you morons?!” Nami snaps.

“Nami, sweetheart, what were you expecting?” I sigh, swishing around my tea. “We *did* declare war on the government. We destroyed quite a few buildings. We embarrassed a bunch of Vice Admirals by escaping. I murdered the director of CP9. It was a very eye-catching event.”

Nami buries her head in her hands. “That doesn’t mean I have to like it! They’re gonna be chasing us twice as hard now!”

“At least we’re gonna have a super fast ship!” I say brightly.

“We are?” Luffy asks, cocking his head.

“Oh right, you were asleep. Franky’s agreed to build our new ship, it’s gonna be a fucking masterpiece,” I explain.

His entire face lights up. “Really?! He’s such a great guy!”

“I’m excited to see how it turns out,” Zoro muses.

“I think I’ll spend some time and money shopping until it’s ready,” Nami says happily, turning to her bags before pausing. “...Where’s the 100,000,000 berri that used to be here? I set it aside for shopping for the ship.”

You could hear a pin drop halfway across the island. “I spent it on meat and booze for the party!” Luffy says brightly.

“You *what?!* That was our money!” Nami shrieks.

“Hey Chopper let's go for a walk doesn’t that sound nice?” I rush out, picking Chopper up from the table and sprinting for the door before Nami goes full nuclear.

“It was our party too,” Luffy says matter of factly.

“LUFFY!” Nami roars.

“It was super fun! Like, the whole town was there!” Luffy cackles.

Me and Chopper are gone before we can hear the rest of the screaming.

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I know we have something like five days before anything of any substance has to be done, so I take my time getting around to what I need to do. I start with some simple meditation down by the ocean.

The rhythmic rush and recede of the tide fills the air around me, the cries of gulls further down the shore easily ignorable as I focus on breathing and just existing as myself.

“You sure it’s safe for you to be this close to water without a life preserver? Your clumsy ass might fall in.”

Well it was a peaceful atmosphere for a while and that’s what matters.

“What’s up, Zoro?”

Zoro drops down onto the rocks beside me and I peek an eye open to regard him. He has his sword, Yubashiri, in his hands and is just looking out to the water like I was. “Nothing much. What’s up with you?”

I shrug. “Meditating. Or trying to. I still kinda suck at it.”

“You’ll get better with time. That or you’ll find a method that works better for you. Meditation doesn’t just have to be sitting still and emptying your mind. Not that emptying your mind should be all that hard for you,” Zoro snarks.

“Har har har, laugh it up,” I grumble. I let my eyes linger on the slightly tense line of his shoulder for a moment. “Something bothering you?”

Zoro is quiet for a moment. “So how’s it feel to be hated by the sea now?” he redirects.

I sigh and shake my head with a smile, but let him get away with it. “I don’t think we’re hated by the sea. I think she just loves us too much to let us go,” I say softly, recalling a vague half forgotten dream of being held in the water as if in the arms of someone who cares for you.

“Yeah?” Zoro breathes out.

“Yeah,” I sigh back.

“You know, Nami decided we weren’t gonna ask you questions about you knowing stuff. That being said,” he pins me with a piercing look that goes right through me, “you ever pull a stunt like that again, we’ll be having words.”

I blink a couple times. “Oh. I — I wouldn’t really mind if you asked,” I say quietly before taking a breath. “Now why don’t you tell me why you’re moping like someone died.” He unsheathes the sword and shows me the rusted ruins of the blade. “Ah.”

“I’m mourning,” he deapans. “Some stupid Marine Captain fucken killed my sword.”

“Aw, Zoro, I’m sorry,” I say sympathetically. “Have you thought of a resting place for her? Or do you plan to keep her with you?”

He grimaces. “I was waiting until I found somewhere nice on the island, but nowhere felt right. So then I was waiting until I found a replacement sword but I have no money to buy a good one and *no,* I am not borrowing from the witch.”

“So you’re hanging onto her for now?” I inquire.

He nods. “Guess I’m gonna be Two and a Half Sword Style Zoro for a bit. Hope they put that on the bounty.”

I chuckle and pat him on the knee. “You’ll find a worthy successor, and a suitable resting place. The universe will send one at you sooner or later.”

“I don’t need the universe sending me a sword. I’ll get it myself,” he says snootily.

“Of course, I’m sorry for insinuating you were anything less than the master of your own fate,” I say sarcastically.

Zoro pushes me into the water.

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I decide the next best use of my time is to go shopping with my ladies. Right now me and Robin are taking a book scouting detour while Nami goes off to buy clothing. We’re walking arm in arm down the streets scouring the buildings for a bookstore that hasn’t been destroyed by Aqua Laguna and is in fact open.

“...then I told him that code I got from my guy and he let me in no problem. I can’t really complain about their shit security when it works so well for me,” I say, in the middle of

regaling Robin with the tale of my train adventure.

"I'm sure you would have been able to convince them no matter how good their security was," Robin snickers. "You really do have a gift for it."

"Oh so *now* I have a gift? Before it was unwanted stubborn persistence," I joke.

"Well, any one of your attempts was better than what Usopp tried when he realized I wasn't going to go with him," she reveals. "He stood up straight and said right to my face, 'I hate to pull this card, but Ed and Luffy are getting married and need you as part of the wedding party!' It was incredibly bizarre and I don't know why he thought it would work."

I burst into cackles right in the middle of the street. "I made a joke about the Fake Marriage Go! code but I didn't think it would make him do *that!"*

"I don't want you to think your persuasion wasn't working, though. There were quite a few moments where I really considered just running away with you and the crew," she admits. "But I guess my fear won me over. I apologize for that. I suppose I was just… holding onto hope that the full force of the government would scare you off."

I wave my hand dismissively. "You have no idea how little it would have taken for us to declare the World Government our enemy regardless. Honestly this was basically an excuse for it."

She gives me a soft smile and we continue on our way.

"Do you remember your first night on the Merry?" I blurt.

Robin pauses half a beat before answering. "Yes, I remember. You were playing cards, and everyone was quite uncomfortable with me."

“We were playing Speed,” I continue. “Nami always cheats but she still can’t manage to beat me. You know the thing about Speed? It’s not about reflexes; it’s about getting lucky, knowing when you’re getting lucky, and keeping your goddamn poker face when you are.”

“Is that so?” she hums.

“Yup. I was furious and scared that whole train ride, and I still managed to lie my ass off to get to you. Every time I got through a car, or managed to talk my way around someone, I was internally screaming for joy. I knocked a guy unconscious and still had to go back and tell someone I respected a lie about it. I got really *really* lucky on that trip,” I admit.

“The mere fact that you got on the train was astounding enough for me,” Robin muses.

“Yeah? It literally only took me one phone call and like ten minutes to scam my way on. That was the easy part—” I cut myself off as me and Robin stop beside an alley, both of us staring into it with equal amounts of incredulity and joy.

“Having a rough time?” Robin calls.

“You could say that. I don’t even know how I got myself into this situation—” Zoro huffs before stopping dead and turning to us in complete horror. “YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME!” Then he lunges at the pair of us and pushes us into the alley.

“Loving the fit, Zoro. It’s good to experiment with style,” I cackle. Because this absolute gem of a man is in a crop top that says mama and has three babies strapped to his chest. “You have something you want to tell us?”

He slams his hand over my mouth. “Now listen—”

“Ed! Robin! Where’d you go?” Nami calls from out on the street.

Zoro flattens himself into the alley with an alarmed look on his face before shooting absolute daggers at the pair of us until Nami's voice fades off. Then he's heaving in a sigh of relief.

"You don't have to worry, we won't be telling anybody," Robin says with a breezy smile, pulling me out of the alley back onto the street.

"We won't?" I parrot.

"We won't," she confirms. "Besides, I think this is a nice look for you."

Zoro's face twitches into a scowl and turns bright red before the pair of us are sashaying down the street away from him. We get maybe a block before we both stop and turn to each other and promptly burst into laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Making it work with your mom except your mom is a 28 y/o traumatized survivor of genocide and also not your mom at all.

School has been repeatedly reversing like a truck over my feet and I've barely had the time or motivation to write recently T-T The goal, of course, it to make it to the timeskip without having to take a hiatus then take a p substantial one before continuing to post-timeskip, but that is starting to feel more and more unrealistic. I am, of course, going to do my best but no one get upsetti spaghetti if we take a week (maybe more ._.) off at some point.

Chapter 82: Chapter Eighty Two: Gift Another Moniker

Chapter Summary

Rose - The Oh Hellos

It takes me an embarrassingly long time to remember to call Ace.

Chapter Notes

First gang I wanna say thank you for the overwhelming support the second I mentioned I might take a break. I have made the executive decision to continue as we are for now, though in the upcoming weeks we may be dropping to a single chapter a week, depending on how hard school rocks my shit.

While you were doing whatever it is people do as children, I was studying the art of devotion and pure spite. I'm not gonna let this story kill me but I'm gonna let it get close enough it remembers the colour of my eyes.

Anywho with that out of the way go read the chapter you lunatics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes me an embarrassingly long time to remember to call Ace.

I'm in the middle of a peaceful late brunch with Chopper, the rest of the crew are out and about already, and it hits me so suddenly I actually fall out of the chair I had been sitting on as I jolt back.

Chopper yelps as I go scrambling across the floor and yank my Transponders out of my bag, setting them up at light speed and jamming in his number. "C'mon, pick up pick up don't be dead c'mon—"

"Hello?" Ace's voice comes through.

I heave a heavy and loud sigh right into the mic, the tension from my shoulders melting away. “Oh thank god! You’re not dead! You’re not dead, right?” I demand.

“Er — yeah, I’m not dead?” Ace says slowly, sounding confused. “I think I should be saying this shit to *you* though — storming Enies Lobby? You and Luffy are goddamn crazy. I’m impressed,” he praises, sounding more smug than anything.

“Where are you right now?” I ask, fidgeting in place.

“Right now? Uh… on my way to the rendezvous point to meet Sabo, I’m about to reach some island I don’t remember the name of. H something,” he answers. “I was about to dock at the island and get lunch before continuing.”

“Oh,” I say faintly. “Sorry about that.”

He’s not on Banaro. He’s not on Banaro. *He’s not on Banaro.*

A grin starts to split my face. “That… that is great news. That is the best news I’ve heard in weeks!”

The snail’s face twists in confusion. “It is? Are you alright, Ed? Did you hit your head during your raid or something?”

“Multiple times on multiple walls and feet,” I respond automatically. “Oh my god. This is such good news.”

“I’m glad you’re so passionate about lunch?” he says, sounding more confused by the second.

“I am! I’m so passionate about lunch!” I laugh incredulously. Elation is making my body feel weightless, *he’s not on fucking Banaro,* and I think I might pass out from happiness.

“Ed? Buddy, you’re kinda freaking me out,” Ace says with drawn out hesitance. “Did something happen? Are you alright?”

I take a deep breath. “Yeah, Ace. I’m alright. I’m more than alright,” I say softly. “Sorry, I’ve just been thinking about you. I’m happy you’re ok.”

Ace pauses. “Alright. Sure. So I assume everything with your war on the government is going well?”

I chuckle. “As well as it can, it was kind of a spur of the moment thing. Y’know your grandpa came to see us? Funny guy.”

The snail shudders. “Sure, funny, go with that. Are you ok?”

I roll my eyes at the repeated question. “I’m here, aren’t I? This is nothing I can’t handle.” Then I flash a big cheeky smile. “Oh! By the way, I got a surprise for you!”

He raises an eyebrow but returns my smile. “Oh? What a coincidence, I have one for you as well.” Exciting, wonder what that’s about. “But please, go first.”

“Bad news, we’re never gonna be able to go swimming together. Sad face. Good news, we both have a fruity little problem in common! Happy face!” I exclaim. “What that makes it sound like the surprise is us both being gay — I mean I ate a Devil Fruit.”

The snail gapes. “Ok that was not anywhere in the realm of where I thought that was going. *What?!”*

“God, it was a whole thing. I broke into this safe — also tell your brother I’ve got a present for him I think he’ll love — and there it was and I was kinda about to die so I just fucking gulped it down. Swallowed it whole, horrible idea, do not recommend,” I announce.

“You got a present for Sabo? You’re really working your way into the good graces of our… brotherhood? Family? Brotherhood is funnier. We’re going with brotherhood. Also I can’t imagine swallowing it whole would be worse than just taking a bite, but who am I to judge,” he rambles.

“Brotherhood is hilarious, I fully approve. Now what’s this I hear about a surprise for me?” I inquire, leaning forward with an expectant grin.

Ace chuckles. “Of course that’s what you’re focused on. Do you remember how you were telling me about that girl you met in the clouds? The one who gave you the sunflowers?” I hum in acknowledgement. “Well on the last island I stopped at I saw something that reminded me of that and well, I couldn’t really help myself.” Aw he sounds embarrassed.

“You don’t say?” I drawl, excitement building and making me fidget again.

“Well. Remember how the first words you said to me were literally, ‘I’d love me a cowboy hat like that?’” *Sweet Jesus he didn’t.* “I got you a cowboy hat. With a sunflower on it.” *He fucking did.*

“No fucking way.”

Oh my god.

“It’s yellow too.”

Oh my god.

“Ace I’m gonna love you until the end of time itself,” I say with full sincerity.

Ace coughs, the snail turning bright red and its eyes shifting off to the side. “Yeah, yeah. Anyway, the Marine presence in these waters has skyrocketed thanks to your little stunt, so it may be a while before I even have enough space to manoeuvre and get it to you. After I get Blackbeard, of course.”

My heart sinks a little at the mention of him. “Right. Him. So your plan is still on?”

The snail's face hardens the tiniest bit. “Absolutely.”

I sigh. “Ok. But you’ve got Sabo coming with you now? And you’re not gonna run off ahead without him?”

That triggers an eye roll. *“No,”* he says, a little snooty. “I made a promise and I keep my word. Besides, maybe… maybe having help won’t be such a bad thing.”

Something in my chest releases and floats away. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he confirms.

“Ok. Good,” I breathe out.

There’s a moment of silence. “Soooo… anything else or can I go get lunch? Not that I don’t love this,” Ace drawls.

“Jackass,” I say without any heat. “Yeah, go get your lunch. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I’ll call you when I meet up with Sabo — you’ve just gotta meet him. I’ve told him waaaay too much about you at this point,” he gushes.

“Aw, you talk about me? I’m touched. But you really should get your lunch, so bye! Love you!” I croon.

“Shut up. Love you too,” he grumbles, then ends the call.

I blow out a breath then turn back to where Chopper is watching me bewildered. “So, brunch?”

———

“What? Usopp wants to come back?!” Luffy yelps.

“Yeah. He was rehearsing on the beach,” Sanji repeats, taking a drag of his cigarette with closed eyes.

I sigh and turn away from the window where I was watching the last dregs of the sunset. I had hoped after our talk at the party he would pony up and just talk to us — if nothing else actually stage one of those ‘accidentally bumped into each other’ scenarios he was rehearsing.

“That’s great news! I was getting worried — let’s go get him right now!” Luffy announces, pumping his arms in the air.

“That’s Usopp for you, shoulda known,” Nami muses with a smile. Luffy goes bounding for the door before a voice stops him.

“Hold it!” Zoro shouts. Everyone pauses in place. “Ed, are you going to do your job, or will I have to?”

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and cross my arms. When I reopen them everyone in the room is staring at me expectantly. “We can’t go get Usopp,” I say calmly.

“What?! Why?!” Luffy demands. I grimace and look off to the side.

“You can’t kiss his ass and beg him to come back, you know that,” Zoro says firmly, taking up the silence. “Until he bows his head and apologizes, he can’t come back.”

“Zoro you big jerk!” Chopper shrieks.

Nami scowls and starts stalking forward. “Hey! I don’t know what your problem is, but—”

“Shut up!” Zoro barks, stunning both of them into silence. “Ed, *do your job,”* he repeats.

I bit into my lip and frown at the floor. “As it stands, Usopp has forfeit his position in this crew,” I say slowly. “He all but spit on you, Luffy. I know we’re pretty laid back, but if you let that go without issue, it sets a dangerous precedent.”

“But—” Luffy tries to cut in before Zoro shoots him a glare.

“We’re a *pirate crew.* An unconventional one, mind you, but a pirate crew no less. That means if we don’t adhere to some kind of order, some kind of hierarchy, things fall apart very quickly,” I explain. “When things like laws don’t bind you, respect and the chain of command have to. Usopp disregarded that, and has to make up for his mistake.”

Looks are shot between the crew. Luffy opens and closes his mouth a couple times. “Even so…” Nami trails off.

“I love Usopp,” I state without hesitation. “And I truly believe he loves us too. But if he can’t respect Luffy as not only a friend but as a *Captain,* then there will be more problems down the line. I love Usopp and I want him to come back too, but he has to come to us on his own terms and say what needs to be said.”

There's a long moment of silence. Half of them are fidgeting in place, and the other half are deadly still. Zoro gives me a solid nod that doesn't do much in the way of loosening the knot in my stomach.

"It's alright if you've already forgiven him," I say gently. "But he does need to take the first step."

"He'll come back though, right..? Usopp will definitely come to talk to us…" Chopper says in a wavering voice. Nami gives him a stricken look.

"He will," Luffy says. He sounds like he wants to believe it, but something in his eyes wavers.

Maybe that's what puts us all into motion. We all immediately turn and start getting ready for bed. Robin disappears into the bathroom, Sanji goes to fetch another cigarette from his bag, and Chopper just turns around and throws himself into his bed.

Nami crosses the room to the window and starts closing it. "Nami," I call. She pauses. "Leave it open?"

She furrows her brow at me but steps away.

Usopp is outside that window right fucking now. I don't even know if he heard any of that. It hurts even thinking about spending another night with my family and him not being there.

I startle as a hand lands on my shoulder. When I look up Zoro is right there with an unreadable look on his face. "I know you have your own feelings and opinions on how you want Usopp handled. And I know how badly you deal with people… leaving you behind. You staying firm in this is hard on you, I know that. So… thank you," he says, slow and purposeful.

I blink back tears and can literally feel my lip trembling as he squeezes my shoulder before moving on.

“You’re a damn good First Mate,” he throws over his shoulder.

That just about does it. I toss myself face down into bed and muffle a strangled noise.

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“The Log is set!” Nami announces over breakfast.

We’re three days into the five day wait Franky had given us on the ship’s completion, and I never thought I’d say this but being on solid land is starting to make me antsy.

“Now we just need the ship! Auuugh I don’t wanna wait any longer!” Luffy cheers, doing a handstand on one of the beds.

“He said it was a surprise, so we shouldn’t go see it until it’s finished,” Zoro reminds us, doing some makeshift wrestling with reindeer-form Chopper.

“Do you know where your Log Pose is leading you?” Kokoro inquires, nursing some morning wine. We love a day drinker, I guess?

Nami’s brow furrows as she inspect the Pose. “No. Where? The needle is kinda pointing down…”

Kokoro laughs. “Of course… The island that’s pointing to is Fishman Island, paradise beneath the seas!”

I smack Sanji over the head as soon as he whips around. “No! Bad Sanji! Have some decorum!” He gives me the best puppy eyes he can manage, but I don’t break my glare.

“Fishman Island, huh? I’ve got mixed feelings,” Nami murmurs, tracing the globe of her Pose with a frown.

“Yeah, with everything that happened with your village that makes sense,” Luffy states without tact.

“But those fishmen were pirates, weren’t they?” Zoro asks pointedly. “Stands to reason they’re not *all* like that.”

“Yeah! See, even the shitty swordsman knows how great Fishman Island is, and he’s stupid!” Sanji crows before I tackle him to the ground.

“Sanji knock it off or I’m tossing you like a caber right into the ocean!” I squawk, trying to wrestle him flat on the floor.

“I’m not hurting anyone let me dream damn it!” he wails, flailing like a drowning cat.

“But it’s not easy to get to the paradise,” Kokoro says over our screeching.

“I’m curious about the ‘beneath the sea’ part,” Robin adds, also ignoring us.

Kokoro chuckles. “That… you’ll understand that when you get there. That’s not the problem.” Then she tosses the newspaper onto the table. “Take a looksie at the front page, this is a pretty recent paper.”

I stop trying to twist Sanji like a pretzel so I can hop over and take a peek over Nami’s shoulder as she reads it. “‘14 ships disappeared this month… again.’ What does that mean?”

“The Florian Triangle,” Kokoro says gravely. “It’s an area you have to pass through to reach the paradise.” I swear to god the lighting gets more dramatic as she leans forward. “More than 100 ships go missing in that space each year. People often come across ships without a crew, and there are constant sightings of a ghost ship that carries the dead on board!”

“THERE ARE GHOSTS ON BOARD?!” Chopper shrieks.

“I can meet a living skeleton?!” Luffy awes.

I place a solemn hand on his shoulder. “Luffy, I promise you I will do everything in my power to let you meet a living skeleton.”

Both Nami and Zoro round on me with glares as Luffy starts whooping. “Don’t promise him that!”

“I don’t wanna meet them, I don’t want to *see* them! *No creepy ships!* What exactly happens on that ship?!” Nami gargles out, pitch rising at incredible rates.

“Ngagaga, who knows?” Kokoro cackles ominously. “If something happens to you, you won’t come back alive. A dark sea with thick fog… be warned. It’s a dangerous sea with many accidents regardless, so be prepared.”

“Pirate ships and merchant ships coming back as ghost ships… The legends of a treasure filled ship always revolve around them,” Robin muses.

“Let’s go find the ghost ships!” Nami shouts, 180-ing at the promise of treasure.

“Yes! Hell yes!” I holler, sticking my arms straight up.

“Leave it to me!” Luffy hoots, jumping up onto the table.

“NOOOOOO!” Chopper wails.

Sanji smoothly gets up from the ground with a dreamy smile and lights a cigarette. “Bring on the disaster, I guess. We’ll have plenty of food on board, so it should be fine.”

“Treasure ships… maybe they’ll have swords,” Zoro mutters to himself.

“...Well good luck,” Kokoro snickers.

“Pirate bros!” someone yells from outside our repaired wall. “Strawhat!”

“What’s that?” Luffy asks, furrowing his eyebrows and jumping off the table. Both Kiwi and Mozu come skidding into the room before sliding down onto their knees, Chimney and Gobei right on their heels. “Oh, hey. What’s up?”

“Franky bro asked you all to come…” Mozu huffs.

“...The ship is finished!” Kiwi finishes.

“It’s a really great one!” Chimney proclaims.

“EH?! It’s already done?! That’s so much faster than planned!” Luffy cries, jumping up and down then bounding for the door.

“Five top-notch shipwrights working around the clock really makes a difference!” Nami awes.

“Alright! Let’s go!” Sanji agrees, herding us all after Luffy and outside.

“Whooo!” me and Chopper cheer.

“STRAWHAAAAAAAT!” someone screams from the gate. We all turn as Zambai and a few other members of the Franky Family come sprinting onto the property before collapsing into a heap at our feet.

“What’s going on? Why is everyone running today?” Luffy inquires.

Zamabi huffs for a second before sucking in a long breath. “I… have a favour to ask of you,” he declares. “Have you seen your new wanted posters?”

“Wanted posters?” Luffy and I blurt in unison, leaning forward in excitement.

“You have an outrageous bounty on your head, Strawhat! The rest of you too, you’ve all got bounties!”

“Me too?!” Sanji, Nami and Chopper all yell in unison. Sanji with a wide grin, Nami with significantly more horror and Chopper half incredulous, half ecstatic.

“See for yourselves!” Zambai announces, dropping a stack of paper he had been holding. Lo and behold, our bounty posters all sprawl out onto the grass. “All eight of you have bounties!”

My jaw fucking drops at the sight of mine.

First off, my face is plastered in caked on blood so that’s nice. My eyes are closed and I’ve got this almost serene if not for my eyebrows look on my face. The sky is reddened by an

explosion in the back, and I'm halfway looking like some old painting of a knight or something. My gun made it into frame, also caked in blood which is pretty damn menacing. More menacing is the fucking number at the bottom.

"Someone catch me I'm going to faint," I choke out.

130,000,000 berri. *130,000,000 berri.*

"130,000,000 BERRI?!"

Holy fucking balls. THAT'S TOO FUCKING HIGH. WAAAAY TOO HIGH.

"WHY IS MINE STILL HIGHER THAN ZORO'S?!"

"Wooooh! Mine went up!" Luffy laughs. Robin and Zoro both look at theirs with satisfied expressions. Chopper all but faints at his frankly insulting 50 berri bounty. Nami starts screaming and Sanji's face droops like it's made of hot taffy. "Hey, Sniperking got one!"

"Er — yeah we… understand how you feel? And that you have a lot to say. But uh, our request is in regards to this!" Zambai rushes out, shoving one more poster at us.

I whistle as my companions gasp at Franky's face. "44,000,000 isn't bad for a first bounty. Not bad at all."

"That's not even half of yours," Nami wheezes out, clutching her chest like she's having heart palpitations.

I bury my face in my hands. *"Trust me I noticed."*

“What did you fucking *do?!* They’re calling you the *Detective of the Damned!* WHAT KIND OF TITLE IS THAT?!” she screeches, waving my poster around like it’s personally offended her.

“Right?!” I agree, nodding emphatically. “They have to know giving us badass epithets just motivates us to do more bad shit!”

Nami just screams into her hands.

“Er… anyway! It’s terrible that big bro has a bounty now! We all got off the hook, but not him. His life will be at stake if he stays in Water 7! If he’s caught again, there will be no way to save him or ourselves!” Zambai bursts out. “I’m sure he’ll be worried about us and refuse to leave the island, so we’re all in agreement!” He takes a deep breath and looks around at his fellows. They all give him nods and he turns back to us with fierce determination all over his face. “Please! Use force if necessary! Take him out to sea! He’s the son of a pirate after all!”

We all look at each other for a second while silence settles. I side eye my Captain and he gives me a nod. I nod back then turn to the group. “Well duh. We already decided that.”

Gambai blinks at me. “You did?”

“Obviously. He’s a cyborg with a bright blue pompadour who’s building our ship and walks around half naked. Of course we’re taking him with us,” I say with a raised eyebrow, a little surprised they weren’t expecting us to say yes immediately.

“Well, it’s not that we necessarily thought you’d say no,” Gambai says offhandedly. “Just not… for those reasons?”

“He helped us with Robin. And he’s weird,” Luffy says like it’s a full explanation. “Plus he’s a good guy. Why wouldn’t we want him?”

“We’ll kidnap him if we have to. Or just pain Shanghai him. It worked with Zoro,” I say breezily, ignoring the glare the man in question shoots me.

Gambai’s lip wobbles. “Thank you! Thank you so much!” He spins back around to his fellows. “They agreed! Now we know what we have to do!”

There’s a resounding “YEAH!” from the whole group, and then they’re retreating from the property en masse.

“Wha — where are you going?!” Kiwi calls after them.

“Scrap island is that way!” Mozu adds.

“I can’t tell you, we have some dirty business to take care of. Mozu, Kiwi, thank you for all you’ve done,” Gambai says, then he’s off.

The girls look at each other then back to us with confused looks. We just shrug.

“So, ship?” I prompt.

Zoro claps his hands. “Ok, Strawhats inside! Pack your shit in record time or you’re getting left behind!”

“You don’t have the authority!” Luffy and I both squawk, scrambling to do what he says anyway.

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“Has anyone seen my hairbrush? I can’t find it!” I holler from inside the bathroom, half crammed into the cabinet under the sink.

“Sorry, I’ve got it right here! I snapped my comb in half this morning!” Nami calls apologetically from the room itself. I trot back in and take it from her waiting hand before stuffing it in my bag.

“Everyone is clear on how we’re dealing with Usopp, right?” Zoro asks yet again, already standing at the door with his shit packed. Guess it pays to not be hoarder.

“Yeah,” Luffy responds glumly, absolutely dwarfed by his massive backpack before turning to Sanji. “How much longer are you going to stay depressed? It’s a pretty high first bounty.”

“Shut up!” Sanji screams, waving his ridiculous poster around, incensed. “Why is mine the only one hand drawn?! Tell me which part of this looks like me?!”

“It looks just like you,” Zoro says with a blank face. Sanji spins around and literally starts speaking in tongues, or what might be ancient runes. “What the actual hell are you saying?”

Sanji just collapses onto the ground with a broken moan. “I’ll be a laughing stock… All the ladies out there will never know…”

“That guy lied to me. He said he was a reporter for a local paper,” Nami says with distaste, looking at her own poster. “At least I look cute in it, I guess. But having a bounty…”

“I’m a pirate too!” Chopper wails, holding his poster like it’s trying to eat him. “I fought like a brave man, I’m not satisfied with this amount!”

I put my hand on the top of his hat and he stares up at me with an indignant and slightly teary look. “Just think about how well you can take people by surprise now. No one's gonna expect the so-called pet of the Strawhat Pirates to kick absolute ass.”

He blinks a couple times before his face sets in a determined expression. “Yeah… yeah! I’ll use this to my advantage and surprise everyone! They’ll never see me coming!” he proclaims.

I smile. “Atta boy.”

“Hurry up! Bro’s waiting for you!” someone yells outside. We all grab the last of our belongings and trudge out the door, leaving poor Sanji in a heap on the floor.

“Everybody have everything? We’re getting on the ship and leaving right away!” Zoro calls to the lot of us, receiving various sounds of acknowledgement back.

“Wait shit I forgot my toothbrush—” I blurt, spinning back around to get it.

“Get Sanji while you’re in there!” Nami calls after me.

“Just leave him behind,” Zoro suggests.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?!” Sanji screams as he comes sprinting out after me with toothbrush in hand.

Chapter End Notes

Lets hear it for Kaya in Syrup Village seeing Usopp's poster, looking at the name and just bluescreening.

Speaking of posters, here's Ed's. I tow a fine line between too much blood and too little, and I never know which side I'm falling on.

Oh also Vivi art because I was in a mood and I miss her dearly. Harold get the rake the lesbians are pining again—

Chapter 83: Chapter Eighty Three: Our House

Chapter Summary

> *Our House - Madness*
>
> Those of us at the front freeze so suddenly that the people behind us, namely Sanji who bumps into me, nearly bowl us over. “What are you — oh.”

Chapter Notes

> I gotta go get bloodwork done tmr and my needle phobia is er — not pleased. Pray for me gang.
>
> I started writing a fight that I was struggling to get to but like now that I'm writing it... y'all writing with Ed's fruit is the funniest shit. Like what the hell are they doing? Nobody knows, certainly not them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We don’t quite make it to the ship before we’re stopped in our tracks.

We’re smack dab in the middle of some kinda plaza that I know was only cleared of rubble and debris from Agua Laguna yesterday, and Usopp is at the other end with wide deer-in-headlights eyes.

I figure from that look alone that this isn’t one of his planned ‘accidentally bumped into each other’ scenarios.

Those of us at the front freeze so suddenly that the people behind us, namely Sanji who bumps into me, nearly bowl us over. “What are you — oh.”

Luffy, who had burst into uncontrollable sweat the second he saw Usopp, jerks forward with his jaw dropping in an aborted attempt to say something before he seems to remember the

conversation we had literally just before leaving the room we were staying in.

His mouth snaps back shut and the whole group of us stare at Usopp in complete silence while his eyes start frantically darting around the plaza. He gapes his mouth open and shut a couple times like a fish and I'm over here wondering what exactly I changed that made this meeting happen.

"F — Fancy meeting you guys here," Usopp squeaks out, not meeting any of our eyes. "I was just on my way to get a ship, you see, but since I found you—"

He cuts himself off when he seems to think better about the words coming out of his mouth. The silence rings out from our group like the morning before battle, disapproval, pity and sorrow tinting the air bitter.

Usopp's shoulders drop. His eyes cast onto the ground as he takes a deep breath, then steels his back and stands up straight. "I wasn't on my way to get a ship," he announces. We blink at him and he deflates just a little bit. "But by the looks of it, you are."

My eyes dart down to my bag then back to him. I say nothing. I hear a half muffled sound and glance over to see Zoro clamping a hand over a squirming Chopper's mouth. Kiwi and Mozu, both following at the back of the pack, shift awkwardly.

Usopp's face is doing something funny. I know he doesn't cope well with silence, and us acting like a brick wall is liable to make him start rambling whatever comes to mind instead of what he needs to say.

"You were going to leave without me," he says slowly, but not like an accusation, "because I said some terrible things and was being a stubborn jackass."

Me and Zoro glance at each other out the corners of our eyes, Luffy's hat interposed between us. He hasn't said it yet.

“I…” Usopp hesitates. “I’m…” Is he hesitating or stalling? “I’m not going to apologize for caring about the Merry, even if she’s sunk now.”

Oh no. I watch Zoro’s face twist up from the blank look he’s been sporting, and Chopper squeaks as the hand clamped on his mouth tightens. Nami half opens her mouth before Sanji grabs her shoulder.

“But…” Usopp whispers to the ground. Then his head whips up and we can all see the thick tears cascading down his face with a vengeance. “I’M SORRY! I WAS WRONG ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE! AND — AND I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID MOST OF WHAT I SAID!” He takes a deep breath before continuing. “I know what I did was shameful! And — and I know I left the crew, and if I couldn’t take back all of what I said I’d do it in a *heartbeat* —”

He cuts himself off with a harsh sob and I look up into the sky for a second and will myself not to follow him into hysterical tears.

“Can I please — *please*... Please let me stay with you! Please let me be your friend again!”

Everyone who was in the plaza is staring, but that means absolutely nothing. Luffy has heard the magic words, and that’s all it takes. He’s shooting across the plaza in a matter of milliseconds and barrels Usopp over in a tight, incredibly teary octopus hug.

Me and Chopper, who’s escaped from Zoro’s grasp, are right behind them and I all up elbow drop on the pair of them. Usopp wheezes as we all just collapse in a pile on the ground. I start just kissing every inch of his face I can find before Luffy’s head gets in the way, when I change tactics to just hugging so hard I can feel bones creak.

“I can’t breathe — I love you but I *can’t breathe—”* Usopp croaks, blindly smacking around and hitting me in the head.

“Grin and bear it!” I demand, holding impossibly tighter.

We do eventually shuffle to our feet, faces red and tacky with tears but still stretched by smiles. Nami comes up and socks Usopp hard in the shoulder before giving him a hug of her own. Sanji just gives him a very thorough once over before doing a self satisfied nod and pulling him into a head lock to give him a noogie.

Zoro stands stoic for a long long moment and Usopp starts to twitch and sweat under his stare. Then he gives him a curt nod and resumes walking. “Well we don’t have all day. C’mon, we have a ship to go see.”

Usopp sags in relief and I have to snap my arms out and redirect Zoro when he starts walking the completely wrong direction.

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“Bro! We brought the Strawhats!”

The rest of our jaunt down to the scrap heap was spent in amicable peace, quiet ribbing, and an not insignificant amount of physical contact (sometimes to the detriment of the people we nearly bowled over while moving through the city, but that’s not my problem.)

“Woah! There’s something huge!” Luffy exclaims, pointing at the large shape obscured by a giant tarp. “Hey! We’re here, Franky! Give us the ship!” From the scraps that make up the island rises Iceberg, rubbing his eyes like he was just asleep. “Ice guy!”

“Well, hello Strawhats. Unfortunately Franky isn’t here, but let me show you the ship anyway. It’s amazing, I can’t even imagine what my face did when I first saw the blueprints. It will be able to cross any kind of sea,” Iceberg says warmly, taking the thick tarp in his hands. “With this ship you can even go to the end of the world. Franky also left you a message, Strawhat—”

“Just show me already!” Luffy shouts vibrating with excitement.

Iceberg just smiles and yanks. "'If you'll be the King of the Pirates one day, you'll need to sail with the king of the beasts!'"

The tarp falls away and my jaw falls wide open. "Oh sweet Mary mercy on my *soul—"*

She's giant. And beautiful. And oh my lord I love her so much. Everything from the sails to the rail to the figure head, she's gorgeous from head to toe. Or — uh, crows nest to keel? Aft to stern? Either way, she's the most amazing piece of craftsmanship I've ever seen.

"Woah! It's huge! It's beyond amazing! There's so much stuff!" Luffy hoots, literal stars coming out of his eyes.

"He's really giving us this?!" Chopper awes.

"Ha… It's twice as big as the Merry!" Zoro says appreciatively.

"Check out that gaff sail!" Nami croons. "She's a sloop!"

"I wanna see the kitchen! Show me the kitchen!" Sanji hollers.

"It's a fabulous ship..!" Robin gasps, smile wide.

She's perfect and I burst out crying. "She's beautiful!" I hiccup.

Zoro jerks out of his awe to give me an incredulous look. *"Again?* What is it with you and boats?"

"Shut up, jerk," I sniff, going with Luffy when he tugs me by the arm towards her.

“I wonder what kind of flower he used for the figurehead?” Chopper asks, following behind us with Robin.

“I think it’s supposed to be a lion,” Iceberg pipes up.

“This is awesome!” Luffy screams as we make it onto the deck. “THERE’S A LAWN!” Then he’s dropping and rolling around in the grass.

I’m wiping tears off my face as soon as they pop out, but it’s like trying to dry a flooded basement with nothing but a tea towel. “It’s just all so beautiful,” I choke out, sitting down on the swing — *the swing, we have a swing on our boat* — and lifting my feet as Usopp goes rolling under me across the grass.

Sanji goes blowing past us up the stairs, then there’s the sounds of a door slamming open and a high pitched scream. “THE FRIDGE HAS A LOCK! LOOK AT THE SIZE OF THIS OVEN! HOLY SHIT!”

Luffy leans over the rail. “Ice guy! Where’s Franky, we gotta thank him!”

“It doesn’t seem to be his intention to see you off. Are you trying to recruit him as a shipwright, Strawhat?” Iceberg responds.

“Yup! We decided,” Luffy says happily. “How’d you know?”

“I think he noticed,” Iceberg says wryly.

Luffy’s mouth dips into a frown. “You mean he wouldn’t want to..?”

Iceberg huffs out a laugh. “Quite the opposite. He probably wouldn’t be able to say no if you ask him right to his face. That’s why he’s hiding.” His face stretches out into a smile. “I’m

sure in his mind he'd love nothing more than to go to sea with you guys, he seems to like you quite a lot. He's entrusting his dream ship to you, so it should be obvious. But still… he believes he has a duty to stay on the island."

Luffy tilts his head. "A duty?"

"Hah. You said duty," I snicker. Luffy gives me a cheeky smile.

Iceberg laughs again. "Nothing more than silly tenacity if you ask me. If you really intend to bring him along, just go straight to using force. It's probably the only way you can get him out of here."

"By force?!" Luffy repeats eagerly. "Can we really?!"

"That's explicit permission!" I cheer.

I wish I could be more surprised at the number of semi-consensual kidnappings we stage, but such is the way of the pirate.

_____

"This ship really is incredible," Nami awes, slowly walking up the stairs behind me. We both peek into the first door and stare for a long moment. "I feel the need to say something about having a whole aquarium on the ship but I'm going to keep my mouth shut."

We make our way up to the top deck where Nami fawns over her tangerine trees and I pause to stare at a seemingly empty flower bed and crouch down to read the little garden marker poking out of the corner.

"Aw hell, that bastard," I whisper, mouth widening into a smile despite the harsh words.

“What is it?” Nami questions, leaning in beside me.

“He planted my sunflower seeds,” I say warmly.

“Oh, that’s sweet,” Nami smiles. “Franky really is a great guy.”

There’s a resounding crash and we both spin back around to the scrap yard as Luffy and Chopper land on the deck of the ship and Franky, buck fucking naked save for his hawaiian shirt, picks himself up out of the junk.

“I’d like to rescind my statement,” Nami hisses out, jaw to the ground and averting her eyes.

“I… I don’t…” I say haltingly. “When I said *force* this is not what I meant.”

I mean I’m not surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised.

“Franky!” Luffy yells from the lawn deck. “Thank you so much for the ship! It’s the greatest! We’ll take good care of it!”

“Yeah. I wish you all a safe journey with the ship,” Franky responds.

“If you want this back,” Luffy hoists Franky’s speedo up like a trophy, “you gotta join our crew!”

There’s a moment of silence from the crew and Franky as the crowd cajoles and yells at him for his indecency. “Give me back my pants, Strawhat!” he demands.

“You gotta join our crew first!” Luffy shoots back.

“Wha — I’m not just gonna join your crew because you stole my pants!” Franky says incredulously. Then his shoulders square.

“Avert your eyes if you don’t want to rip them from your face,” I advise, tilting Nami’s face up and pointedly focusing my eyes on Franky’s nose.

“How much worse could it possibly get…” Nami trails off, the eyes she didn’t avert widening in absolute horror. “Oh my sweet blasphemous god.”

Franky, spitting in the face of decorum and propriety, strikes a pose with his arms in the air as a wave crashes against the shores of the scrap island and he bares his… everything to the world.

Screams ring from the crowd. Screams ring from the ship. Screams ring from the damn heavens themselves.

“I underestimated him! He’s so resolute..!” Luffy gasps, unfortunately sounding like he respects this loathsome tactic. “He’s a man amongst men!”

“No he’s not! He’s a pervert!” Nami screams, slapping her hands over her eyes. “And it’s a *surprise* I like women?!”

“If I’m allowed to be a little violent, I think I can help,” Robin says pleasantly from the main deck, stepping up to the rail and crossing her arms as a hair of hands sprouts between Franky’s legs.

“Oh my god,” I mutter, slapping my hand over my mouth so no one can see how wide I’m smiling.

Franky's scream is ear shattering and loud enough to wake the dead. No really, I'm worried that might have woken up Spandam's corpse all the way from Enies Lobby.

"ROBIN?!" Nami screeches.

"SHE GRABBED THEM!" Luffy shrieks.

"ROBIN YOU'LL SMASH THEM!" Chopper cries.

"THIS CAN'T BE THE BEST SOLUTION?!" Usopp yelps, hands flying to protect his own junk.

"SHE'LL PULL THEM OFF!" Mozu wails.

"LIKE TANGERINES!" Kiwi moans.

"Uh — Hey Robin, I wanted like *all* of him to join the crew?!" Luffy says panickedly. "Don't pull them off!"

"Just looking at it hurts!" Chopper squeals.

"There are certain moments in your life that will make you glad you were not born a man, no matter the benefits," I say sagely. "You can piss virtually anywhere, but at what cost?"

"If you ask a group of pirates to back off in the face of a treasure, you'd better have a good reason, otherwise they'll never back off," Robin advises.

Franky collapses, twitching in pain, to the ground. "I… said I want to stay on this island!" he chokes out, voice high pitched and squeaky. "I'm really thankful to you guys, more than

you'll ever know! I want to go with you guys, but I have shit to take care of here! That's why I gave you that ship! Also, I already quit being a shipwright so this is the last ship I'd make! That is the ship of dreams!"

"Franky," Iceberg pipes up. "This hasn't become your so-called ship of dreams yet."

"I changed my mind on what I want to do!" Franky snaps.

"What you want to do..? That's not right in the least. Whatever you're doing on this island now is just atonement!" Iceberg continues, not soft but not unkind. "You still blame yourself for Tom, but he already forgave you and directed you to a new path! You brought those punks from the backstreets together, you called yourself a bounty hunter and protected this island from looters, you've done everything to protect this city that Tom loved so much. Though I doubt anyone looked at it that way."

"Of course not, that was never my intention!" Franky yells, shakily getting to his feet.

"You quit shipbuilding, and suppressed your will to live… Is that what you're going to do forever?!" Iceberg shoots back. "Even if Tom forgives you, and I forgive you… nothing will change, huh? Why don't you forgive yourself, Franky?!"

Franky starts crying and I gotta admit I'm fighting real hard to not follow his lead.

"You… can live your own dream, right..?" Iceberg finishes quietly, almost too quiet for us to hear.

Franky just starts wailing. Fully collapses on the ground, starts rolling around, and bawling. That, naturally, leads to flailing and destroying shit until a bag is thrown down at him. He pauses and we all look up to where the bag came from.

"It's luggage for your journey, bro!" Gambai screams from the top of the broken staircase leading into the city, the rest of the Franky Family at his side. "Please forgive us, we're ready

to accept any punishment! We're idiots, so we used as much brain as we have to think this through!"

"How can you think with brains you don't even have?! What was your plan?! To take my pants away from me?! To force me into being a pirate?! Don't butt in! It's my life, I decide everything on my own! How can I, as a boss, follow the path my men have laid out for me?!" Franky sneers.

"I'm sorry! But can't we do a little thinking for the man who took us in off the streets?! Can't we think about your happiness?!" Gambai wails.

Franky collapses again, starts crying again, and starts screaming in pain again.

"Robin, adjust your power please! He'll become a woman!" Luffy begs in complete horror.

"He's crying!" Chopper adds.

"It's inhumane!" Usopp cries.

"She'll pull them off!" Mozu wails.

"Like grapes!" Kiwi moans.

"Nico Robin you bitch! I'll never forgive you! It hurts so much I can't stop crying!" Franky screams from the ground.

"Oh, he called her a bitch. That's mean," I murmur disparagingly.

"Er — Robin? Why aren't you doing anything?" Luffy asks.

Robin snickers. “I only squeezed once. He’s clever to blame his tears on the pain.”

There’s just a lot of screaming and crying from the Franky Family. They’re kind of a mess, to be honest.

“Luffy!” Sanji and Zoro scream as they tear across the scrap heap towards the ship, back from wherever the hell they were.

“The situation is getting worse!” Sanji shrieks.

“You’re grandpa is back! They’re already on the offensive, and they’re looking for us!” Zoro shouts.

“EH?! Why?!” Luffy screeches, face going stark white. “I thought we wouldn’t get caught here?!”

“How the fuck should we know?! Just get ready to fucking sail!” Sanji screams. “Wha — Franky why the fuck aren’t your pants back on?!”

“Oh right,” Luffy hisses. Then he throws the stupid fucking speedo down to Franky, who’s gotten back to his feet and catches them nonchalantly. “Now get on my ship, Franky!” he demands.

Franky just starts laughing. “None of that shit! You amateurs who can barely fix a leak. I’d pity this beauty of a ship if I left her without a proper shipwright.” He takes his bag in one hand and his speedo in the other, and marches forward. “Alright! I’ll take care of it! I, Franky, will be the shipwright for your ship!”

We all burst out in cheers. Franky strikes another dumb pose. “I’m gonna be away for a while!” he announces.

“Put your damn pants back on,” Zoro demands, stomping up the stairs to the deck.

I shake my head with a fond smile. Seems this madhouse just keeps expanding.

———

“We’ve got everyone, let’s get the fuck out of dodge,” I announce, jumping down onto the deck.

“Agreed, let’s book it,” Usopp says quickly. “I don’t know why we’re scared of Luffy’s grandpa, by the way why the fuck is your grandpa here, but we *are scared* so I want to leave.”

I blink. “Oh right, you missed this. So Luffy’s grandpa is Garp the Fist.”

Usopp stares at me for a long second as everyone around us gets the ship ready to sail. “That’s a joke, right? That’s a haha funny?” I grimace. His face gets alarmed. “Say sike. Say sike right now or I swear—”

A cannonball crashes into the water beside the ship. Usopp keels over, foaming at the mouth.

“HOLY FUCK IT’S HIM!” Luffy screams, tearing across the deck to crane his neck as Garp’s ship comes surging around the curve of the island.

“Hey Luffy, can you hear me?!” This is your grandpa! I repeat, this is your grandpa!” Garp’s voice comes cutting through the air, projected by a Transponder Snail.

“Hey grandpa, what’s going on?! You said you wouldn’t arrest us here!” Luffy shouts across the waves as we finally start to move.

“Yeah. Thing’s happened. Sorry to say, but I’m gonna have to ask you to just drown and die!” Garp announces, making every single one of us scream. “It’s not like I can make up for it, but I’ll face you myself!”

“THAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF HELPFUL! THAT IS SO SO *SO* FAR PAST HELPFUL!” I scream, ducking behind the wall as if it’ll save me.

“What the hell is he doing?!” Sanji asks slowly. Then there’s a resounding crash as the cannonball Garp fucking *lobbed with his bare hands* smashes into the edge of the scrap island. “DID HE JUST THROW THAT THING FASTER THAN AN ACTUAL CANNON?!”

“We’re gonna sink and die on our new ship—” Usopp sobs into the ground.

“You think you could beat *him* in a snowball fight?” Zoro muses.

I give him my best gobsmacked look. “I told you I was a champion, not a *miracle worker!”*

“Bwahaha! I wish I didn’t get old, my power’s been declining lately!” Garp cackles, voice still coming through over the snail. “Hey Domino! What’s this I hear about a Lieutenant aboard the train still unaccounted for?!”

“OH MY GOD WE NEED TO LEAVE!” I scream. “HE KNOWS!”

Nami screams into her hands. “We need to get out of here NOW NOW *NOW!* Advance the ship at full speed, boys keep those cannonballs anywhere but embedded in our ship!”

“You got it!” the boys respond.

Alright, our boys are good, but they aren't miracle workers either. So we're dodging most of the cannonballs, but some of them are getting way too damn close for comfort.

"Ed! Heads up!" Zoro shouts.

I jerk my head to the side and realize a cannonball is on a collision course with my fucking face and everyone else is otherwise occupied.

Well, no better time to experiment. This dumb fucking Devil Fruit only works with touch, so my timing is going to have to either be perfect, or my luck is just gonna have to come the fuck through.

I take a deep breath and hold my arms out as the projectile reaches me. I yank on the intangible feeling I know damn well is there *(gears, vinyls, galaxies—)* and like the wheel of a car, spin that bitch hard.

There's definitely an impact on my arms — but I actually manage to grasp onto the feeling of the cannonball, and spinning myself in an arc like I'm playing discus, I twist the evil ball back around and send it sailing back at the Marines. I watch in utter disbelief as the thing careens all the way back to them and smashes into the deck, nearly killing Helmeppo by accident.

I turn to stare at Usopp with both of our jaws on the floor. "I can't believe that worked," I say faintly.

"I have never been more afraid of you in my damn life," Usopp blurts. We both blink, then burst out laughing.

"If you jokers have time to laugh, you have time to furl the sail! Now! We gotta get out of here!" Franky suddenly orders.

He both shut up immediately with matching yelps. "Yessir!"

“Are you sure about this?! Taking in the sails?!” Nami calls.

“Stupid bastard! Trust in this ship!” he cackles, doing a little jig that Luffy Usopp and Chopper follow his lead in. “Oh by the way, you need to name this ship!”

“Now?!” Nami asks incredulously. “You want to name the ship at a time like this?!”

“Yup. You can’t sail with a positive vibe unless the ship has a name,” Franky says matter of factly.

“The man has a point,” I agree.

“How about the Black Bear Polar Bear Lion Tiger!” Luffy suggests.

“That’s a horrible name!” Usopp shrieks.

“Then the Super Wolf Gorilla Bear!” Luffy amends.

“Stop just listing animals! Are you reciting a curse?!” Usopp refutes.

“The Squid Octopus Chimpanzee!” Luffy continues.

“WHAT ABOUT THE LION?!”

“I did have a lion in mind with the design, but the guys at Galley-La didn’t seem to get it,” Franky mutters. “Their suggestion was… The Thousand Sunny.”

“WOAH! That’s way better than Dandelion Lion Dandy Unbearable Bear!” Luffy awes.

“Are you just playing word games?!” Usopp shrieks.

“That sounds super cool!” Chopper squeals.

“I kinda wanted Big Boss Lionel, but Thousand Sunny is cool too,” Zoro concedes.

“I was going to suggest Creature of Darkness,” Robin muses.

“I liked Monsieur Sunflower, personally,” Sanji sighs.

“I’d suggest Dawn Treader but I’m pretty sure that would be a copyright infringement,” I add. “Or Sexy Lion. I’m still of the opinion we should follow the naming scheme Foxy’s bitchass had.”

“Have you all lost your minds?!” Usopp screams.

“A ship to sail a thousand seas with a sunny smile. It fits, no?” Robin says with a smile, ignoring him.

Franky chuckles. “That’s just the start, you guys. I’ve got a name that’ll knock your socks off! This ship will be called—”

“Let’s go with Ice guy’s idea! Let’s go with that!” Luffy yells over him.

“The Thousand Sunny it is!” Sanji hoots.

“Agreed!” me, Usopp and Nami all shout.

“Nice to meet you Sunny!” Chopper laughs.

“Thought we’d have a harder time agreeing on this, but I guess it’s working out fine,” Zoro muses.

“So it did,” Robin chuckles.

“Franky stop pouting and use this secret weapon of yours to get us out of here,” Sanji demands as we all turn to where he’s dramatically poking at the deck.

“And make it quick, the Marines’ll catch up any second,” Zoro adds.

“Yeah yeah. Take a good look at Water 7, because it’s gonna be out of sight before you can blink!” Franky boasts.

Luffy blinks. “Really? Then..” he jumps up on the rails. “GRANDPA! AND COBY AND… UH…”

“Helmeppo. His name sounds like a muppet’s so it’s easy to remember,” I supply.

“Oh yeah, I don’t know what that is though. MUPPET GUY!” Luffy continues shouting. “I’M GLAD I COULD SEE YOU AGAIN!”

“WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?!” Helmeppo shrieks.

“What’s the matter Luffy?! I still have cannonballs left!” Garp shouts, lobbing one of said cannonballs at us.

Luffy punches the thing clean out of the air because he’s a badass. “No use! We’ll be getting outta here now, so we’ll see you later!” he calls cheerfully.

“You impertinent punk! You’re my kids kid! Luffy!” Garp huffs, being barely contained by Helmeppo. That muppet.

“Ice guy! We used your name suggestion, you’re awesome! Bye everyone else too!” Luffy hollers, jumping up and down on the rail.

“Luffy, I don't think they can hear you,” Zoro says dryly.

“So? BYE GUYS! THANKS A TON!” I scream across the water. “Wait, does anyone see that giant iron ball half the size of the ship it’s on?”

“WE CAN’T DODGE THAT?! We’re all gonna die we’re all gonna die—” Usopp screams, running in circles like someone set his pants on fire.

“Run Luffy! He’s serious this time!” Coby screams over.

“Franky! GO!” Luffy yells.

Garp hurls the giant goddamn iron ball right at us.

“WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!” Sanji, Usopp and Chopper scream.

Then we’re airborne.

“Awesome!” Chopper cries.

“I never thought I’d feel this again, but here we are…” Usopp awes.

“It takes three barrels of cola, but this baby can fly for a whole kilometre,” Franky explains, rejoining us on deck. “I’m not typing to brag, but whatever the Going Merry could do this ship can do better. This ship will inherit that ship's brave spirit! If it breaks, I’ll fix it without flaw! Count on me for your ship and weapons needs! From this day on, this is your ship!”

“WOOOOO!” we all cheer as we splash back into the water, no shot of the Marines catching up soon enough to catch us.

I wipe salt water from my wild grin and flash it at all of my friends as cups are passed around. I feel so full inside. Love is real and it’s all around us.

“Now then! To Usopp and Robin who came back, and to our new crewmates Franky and Sunny! Cheers! Next stop, Fishman Island!” Luffy announces as we all smack our cups together.

“To our next adventure!” I holler.

Chapter End Notes

Usopp T-T he is my bbg.

That's pretty much the official wrap on the Water 7/Enies Lobby saga! We've got a couple chapters left before Thriller Bark (the next one is so fucking out of pocket and I don't even know if I have to apologize for it lmao) but we made it!

I always struggle a little with closing out arcs because I want them to hit but like... y'all I'm so fucking repetitive lmaooooooo. Like yeah make a toast and sail into the sunset ig. If it works it works?

Chapter 84: Chapter Eighty Four: I Take This Magnetic Force Of A Man To Be Mine

Chapter Summary

Lover - Taylor Swift

“Ah. The marriage ploy,” I muse sagely. Robin snickers and nods. “Well to be fair, if we paid taxes I would marry Luffy for tax benefits.”

Chapter Notes

I wrote this whole thing higher than a kite and I have no excuses. I don't know what happened. I barely remember writing it. I was in that stage where you feel like you're falling through the multiverse every time you move and I guess I got stuck in the one where writing this was a good idea.

I'm officially slowing down, boys. Much to my dismay I'm gonna be cutting the fic down to once a week updates (which may I just say is still a lot so stay well fed, brothers). This shall be our last Wednesday update for a while, but I had to leave middle of the week updates on a high note before shelving them. I will see you lovely folks on Sunday, and the Sunday after that.

OH ALSO MY BLOOD IS NORMAL REJOICE!

VALENTINES DAY SPECIAL GO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ed, I need you to remember this is a library as well as my study, not just your detective room. So if *this* is going to be the norm, we’re gonna have issues,” Nami says slowly, gesturing to my half of the room and the red string strung about the place with disdain.

I frown at her as I finish tacking a string from the word Alabasta to my shitty drawing of Sphynica. “What do you mean? If you duck under enough shit you can get at the books easily.”

That's a bit of a lie, but does it matter?

Nami sighs and gestures to the thick curtain that draws across the room in the middle. "Fine. As long as you don't spill… *that* over into my half of the room, we won't have a problem."

I give her a big smile and dance through the literal web of red string to press a kiss to her face. "Nami, you're a gem."

She frowns good-naturedly. "I know that."

"My loves! I prepared some snacks if you want to join us in the aquarium bar!" Sanji calls, poking his head through the door.

We both follow him out and down into said room and I pause to stare at the shark Luffy must have put in the tank. "I'm a big fan of this addition. Just thought I would make that known," I announce, draping myself over the back of Luffy's chair as Sanji hands me a plate of some kind of chocolatey pie.

"I know, right? Sharks are awesome. Except for the fact he ate all the other fish," Luffy says with a smile I can't help but kiss him on the head for.

"Usopp, say she's kidding!" Sanji suddenly bursts out. I turn to the other half of the table where another conversation is being had. "Tell me you didn't!"

"What did Usopp do this time?" I ask.

"I was just telling them about Longnose's attempt to convince me on the train," Robin responds with a smile.

"Ah. The marriage ploy," I muse sagely. Robin snickers and nods. "Well to be fair, if we paid taxes I would marry Luffy for tax benefits."

“Marriage has benefits?” Luffy asks, a little confusedly.

I shrug. “I mean, legally yes, but those don’t really apply to us.”

“Marriage is about more than that!” Sanji cries. “It’s about irrevocably tying yourself to a person you love for the rest of your life! With the promise to stay loyal and true, and to take care of each other for the rest of your lives!” No one really bats an eye at his dramatic outburst.

“That sounds fun! Ed, let’s get married!” Luffy proclaims.

“Fucken sure, sweetheart. It’s not like we basically weren’t already. Plus I don’t have any plans right now,” I agree without hesitation.

Sanji squawks. “NO THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT—”

“This feels like a very rushed idea,” Zoro deadpans.

“That’s super romantic, bros!” Franky sniffs, dabbing at his eyes with a handkerchief.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Robin snickers.

“Called it. It’s not lying if it’s eventually true,” Usopp says smugly.

“I’ve always wanted to plan a wedding…” Nami mumbles thoughtfully.

“WHY ARE YOU ALL ACTING LIKE THIS IS A GOOD IDEA?!” Sanji screeches.

_____

So we start planning a wedding. This has got to be one of, if not *the,* weirdest things I've ever done in my life. Also the one with the quickest turnaround, seeing as we're suddenly living in a world where Nami of all people is demanding it take place at sunset.

Like Zoro said, very rushed.

"Why is this happening? How did we get here?" Sanji moans despairingly.

"It's Usopp's fault," I blame. "Stop moping and listen to the groom about catering."

"The cake needs to be at least as big as I am. Or bigger. Yeah, bigger is better," Luffy demands. "And it needs to be made out of meat."

Sanji sends me a pleading look I ignore.

"If we're going by hierarchy, since both the Captain and First Mate will be otherwise occupied, I believe the responsibility of officiating falls on the swordsman's shoulders," Robin mentions.

"It *what,"* Zoro says flatly.

"That's true, he's the only one with the actual authority to do it," Nami agrees. "So we have an officiant. What else do we need?"

"When did I agree to this?" Zoro asks no one, since no one deigns to respond.

“I want Chopper to be the ring bearer,” I pipe up.

Chopper blinks at me. “What? I get an important job? Yes!”

“Oh! Rings!” Nami gasps, smacking herself on the forehead. “Where are we gonna get rings?!”

“I’ll make rings. Don’t even worry about it, lil buddies,” Franky announces proudly.

“Oh thank god,” Nami mutters. “I would feel awful if we ended up with something dumb like a jumpring.”

“Nami, seeing as you're handling everything and you are so oh so important to me, would you please be my maid of honour?” I ask. Nami bursts into tears. “Oh Jesus — I’m sorry!”

“No! Thank you! I would be honoured!” she sniffs, hastily wiping her face. “I’ll be the best damn maid of honour the sea has ever seen! Luffy, you gotta pick a best man. And you can’t pick Zoro because he’s officiating.”

Luffy pauses in his animated description of the food he wants to frown. “Hm… Usopp!”

Usopp has the exact same reaction as Nami did.

———

Sanji somehow manages to sit down both Luffy and I in the aquarium bar. “I am going to talk you out of this,” he announces self importantly.

Me and Luffy just stare at him.

“Nuh uh,” Luffy denies.

“Nope,” I agree, shaking my head.

Sanji falters just a little. “You can’t do this,” he begs.

“Why not?” I ask.

“I don’t see any reason not to,” Luffy nods along.

“I’m going to stop you,” Sanji says, changing tactics and towering over us like he’s trying to be intimidating.

Me and Luffy exchange a look. “But why though?” I ask slowly.

His face scrunches up. “You guys aren’t even — marriage is — you’re not even in love or anything!” he bursts out.

I raise an eyebrow. “We live together,” I point out.

“We sleep in the same bed,” Luffy adds.

“I’d follow him to the pits of hell,” I state.

“I’d lead them there.” Luffy declares.

“We kiss like, all the time. Well not really on the mouth. Do you want a mouth kiss in the ceremony?” I ask, turning to Luffy.

He turns to me and shrugs. “Sure, it could be fun.”

We both turn back to Sanji, who’s looking paler by the second. “If that’s not love enough for marriage, I’m not really sure what your standard is,” I summarize.

“I’m not super smart about what marriage entails, but like, aren’t we basically already there?” Luffy says, echoing what I said earlier. “Plus it was *you,* Sanji, who said this was some loyalty for life thingy so I don’t see the big deal. We’re already doing that.”

Sanji buries his face in his hands and screams, all the way out the door.

Me and Luffy turn to each other again and shrug.

_____

“So do you want to wear a dress?” Nami asks conversationally, already shifting through her section of the wardrobe looking for pieces.

I shift on my bed and pick at my lip. “I dunno. My mom always wanted for me to have a big white wedding, but it never felt proper, what with all…” I gesture at myself. “I definitely need a long sleeve shirt though.”

The handprint Sphynica left on my left arm had scarred pretty horrifically despite Chopper’s best efforts, and looking at it still has me in the ‘makes me feel ugly’ mood, and I’m waiting for it to graduate to the ‘wow I’m a hot badass’ mood.

She sends me a look of understanding over her shoulder. “Well your wedding, I cannot believe I’m saying this about who I am saying this about, should be about you and making

you feel beautiful. So if you want to dress pretty, you'll damn well dress pretty. And if covering up that scar makes you feel better, so be it."

She turns around and presents a calf length white pleated skirt and a pair of white pleated dress pants.

I blink and continue to chew on my lip. "You don't think it would be like… a betrayal of my image or whatever?"

She shakes her head fondly. "No, idiot. You're not dressing for anyone but yourself today. Now I somehow don't own a single nice white shirt, long sleeves included, so we'd have to go to Sanji, but if you want you can borrow one of his suits and I can try my hand at tailoring it to you if that would make you feel better."

"I think I'd like to wear the pants," I say softly.

"Yeah?" she says gently, a kind smile gracing her face.

"Yeah," I repeat back. "Oh but I will require a cape. That's non negotiable."

Nami rolls her eyes and throws the pants at me. "I'm sure we can find a suitable tablecloth."

———

"I cannot possibly fathom why you think this is a good idea," Zoro says plainly.

"The better question is why *isn't* it a good idea," I shoot back. "You know what our lives are like, doing dumb shit like this and enjoying it are the most important thing for us to hold onto. It's not like either of us were really going to marry other people anyways, and if we do we can just get this annulled or something."

“It’s just… more dumb than your usual crap,” he huffs. “I mean I’ll go along with it, but I want you to know this is one of the strangest things we’ve done.”

I flash him a beaming smile. “Isn’t it? I think it’s important to branch out.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “You thought up vows? Nami is apparently off coaching Luffy through his.”

I hum. “I think I can bullshit something appropriately sentimental. Hey, do you think if we sent marriage papers off to Marie Jois they’d file it?”

“I hope you trip down the aisle,” Zoro says kindly, then leaves with my cackles following him.

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“Ed! We made you a bouquet!” Chopper announces, presenting me with a nice arrangement of paper flowers bundled up with branches from Nami’s tangerine trees. “Nami gave us greenery and everything!”

“That’s sweet, Chopper. Thank you,” I say warmly, inspecting the origami. “Where has Usopp run off to?”

“He was helping, but then Franky dragged him off to help with the rings,” Chopper explains. “I think they’re almost done? Oh, Sanji said he wanted to ask you about drinks.”

I nod and kiss him on my head on my way out. “Sanji?” I call into the kitchen, marveling at the smells permeating the air.

“Ed, my darling,” Sanji says, sounding both elated and terribly sad. “Did you want your schnapps served at the afterparty? Just for yourself? For the group?”

“Sanji, hun, why are you sad about this?” I ask, exasperated.

He shrugs. “I mean I’m not like, *really* sad. Not about you marrying Luffy. It’s mostly because it’s funny,” he pauses.

I wait for him to continue, and sigh when he doesn’t. “You a little jelly, angel eyes? Not of either of us, just about the whole idea of marriage?” His expression crumples at the edges and he nods silently. “Aw baby, you know you’re gonna get something like this one day, yeah? Probably even better,” I croon, crossing the room to tuck myself into his side.

He leans his head on mine. “Will I?” he asks miserably. “I’m starting to think I’m not cut out for it.”

“Why would you think that?” I ask gently.

“I—” he cuts himself off to take a breath. “My… my mom and my — the man who—” He cuts himself off again to bite into his lip and I startle a little that he would voluntarily share something like this. “They didn’t love each other? Not in a normal way. And I don’t want to — I can’t — what if I—” His hands migrate to his hair and start tugging before I pull them down.

“Sanji,” I say softly. “You are one of the most gentle, kind and loving individuals I have been blessed to meet. You will never, and I mean *never,* be in a situation like that. And if you even get close, one of us will be around to pull you out.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and nods. “My… my mother was very kind,” he breathes out. “I’d like to be like that.”

I smile wide and squeeze his hands. “You are.”

“The rest of it wasn’t kind,” he whispers.

I run my fingers over all of the tiny little scars that cover his hands, nics from kitchen knives that betray his passion, and press a kiss into them. “One good memory, one person, or one beautiful place,” I recite. “That’s all you have to love about where you’re from. Nami taught me that.”

He opens glossy eyes and nods. I give him a wider smile.

“Her name was Sora,” he says hoarsely.

I blink a couple times. “That’s a wonderful name. Sanji, I have a comic book series I really want you to read.”

He blinks a couple times back. “Sure.” He gently takes his hands back and brushes his fingers under his eyes, despite not shedding any tears. “Why are you consoling me on your wedding day? Stop that. Now about the drinks…”

———

“Uh, Robin?” I say quietly as she brushes my hair away from my face and secures it with pins. I can’t quite make myself meet her eyes through the mirror we’re sat in front of.

“Yes?” she hums, smoothing my bangs back with the utmost care.

“Would you… That is — Would you please walk me down the aisle?” I mumble, keeping my eyes closed to her reaction.

Her hands still in my hair for an agonizingly long moment. Then I'm being fiercely hugged from behind as Robin buries her face in my shoulder. I valiantly try not to cry as I feel her shake through a breath.

"Yes," she murmurs. "Of course. It would be my pleasure and honour."

I pretend not to notice her hastily wiping her face as she goes back to fixing my hair into something pleasant.

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"Alright Ed, you ready?" Nami asks for the twentieth time.

I roll my eyes and resist the urge to smack her over the head with my bouquet. *"Yes,* Nami. Shoo! Make sure everything is good to go so I can walk down this damn aisle!"

She shoots me a nasty glare then backs out of the aquarium bar while sticking her tongue out.

I roll my eyes at Robin once the door closes. "Why is she being more neurotic about my wedding than I am?"

"She's taking on twice the nerves because you don't seem to have any," she says with a snicker. "Plus this is a pretty quick engagement to marriage turnaround time, she didn't get to enjoy wedding shopping with you."

I shrug. "What's to feel nervous about? And she picked out my outfit anyway. Oooh, did you see that fish? It was bright yellow!" I gasp, pointing into the aquarium. After my talk with Sanji I've been thinking about the pet store fish aisle a lot.

"So you're ready? And you're sure? And you'll have no regrets?" Robin grills.

I roll my eyes again. “Yes, yes, and yes.”

Nami’s head pokes back through the door. “We’re ready. Don’t trip,” she advises before disappearing again.

Robin stands and offers me her hand. I take and and she leads me to the door, threading her arm through mine and patting my hand. “You won’t trip,” she says firmly, more an order than anything.

“You got it, chief.” I salute. As my tone dial starts to play Frank Sinatra’s familiar tune through the voice of my pseudo dad/uncle, Robin opens the door and leads me out.

The deck of the Sunny has barely been transformed. There’s a runway of lights across the grass acting like our aisle, deck chairs because all the chairs on the ship are bolted down, and a crate draped in a tablecloth set up where the altar would be, but it’s very obvious there was no interior decorator consulted.

Zoro is standing behind the makeshift altar looking mildly grumpy, and in front of it flanked by Nami and Usopp is Luffy. I’m a little sad about how fast this is going only because I can’t milk the finance title. He’s decked out in his normal shorts, his damn sandals, the straw hat of course, and a white dress shirt borrowed from Sanji, same as mine is.

I don’t trip down the aisle, thank you very much. The red tablecloth cape makes a valiant attempt to kill me, but I manage. Robin guides me down and pauses right before the altar to squeeze my hand and give me the warmest smile I’ve ever seen. Then she lets go and gently pushes me forward.

“I knew I forgot something, you don’t have a veil!” Nami hisses in my ear. I roll my eyes at her as the song reaches a close and Robin shuts the shell off, cutting off the message.

“It’s already basically a shotgun wedding, minus a pregnancy. Does it really matter?” I ask rhetorically. The sun is setting and casting everything is a soft golden glow, lights are strung

around the rigging around us and sway gently in the wind.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to — ok fuck this,” Zoro starts, immediately giving up. Nami whips her head towards him, properly incensed, before he continues. “You know why we’re here. These idiots are a package unit and we’re making it official. I was told you have vows, go at it.”

I roll my eyes again. Franky is crying very loudly from one of the lawn chairs and Robin is patting him on the shoulder. “I’ll go first then,” I say sarcastically.

“Sure,” Luffy chirps.

I take a deep breath and look into his eyes. “If either of us had the capacity to fall in love, I’d choose you. In every universe and every lifetime.” I can’t believe I’m getting choked up about this, but I’m fully fighting back tears. “You, Monkey D. Luffy, are it for me. Consequentially and truly. I am yours, honour bound and for taxation purposes, till the universe does us part. Or the government denies our marriage licence but that’s a solvable issue.”

Luffy gives me a big soft smile that warms me from the inside out. “I’m not as good at words as you,” he starts matter of factly, “so I don’t have a big fancy speech. You’re one of my favourite people on the earth, I wanna be with you always. We’re like uh — what are they called? Soulmates! So we gotta stick together forever, yeah?”

Yeah I start crying.

Nami jabs Zoro in the side with a hiss and he jerks a little with a scowl. “Oh — right. Chopper, ring time,” he announces.

Me and Luffy both turn as Chopper struts down the aisle, probably trying to look regal or whatever and failing spectacularly with a throw pillow from god knows where strapped to his antlers.

He comes to a stop in front of us and presents the rings and oh boy — I nearly start crying again. “Franky you fucking—” I choke out, turning the ring over in my hand. They’re both identical gold bands, semi-flat and ribbed like ram horns.

“You like ‘em? I think I did pretty good for such short notice,” Franky says cheerfully from his seat.

“You’re a bastard, but a bastard with very good taste,” I sniff, wiping off my face.

“It'll be kinda like having a little piece of the Merry with us everywhere we go!” Luffy awes, holding the ring right up to his eye.

Nami elbows Zoro again. “Oh my — knock it off! Ok, exchange rings for whatever,” he grunts.

“But I want this one,” Luffy says petulantly.

“Then we switch and I’ll give you that one,” I say simply.

“Oh. Yeah that works,” Luffy blinks, passing me the ring.

“Am I supposed to do the I do’s now? Oh wait — any objections? Speak now or forever hold your peace,” Zoro drones. Sanji opens his mouth before Robin sprouts a hand from his shoulder and slaps it shut. “Great. Ed, do you take Luffy to be your husband?”

“I do,” I answer, twisting the ring onto Luffy’s finger.

“Luffy, do you take Ed to be your… I dunno, spouse or something?” Works for me.

The sun dips below the water and for a second flares green. I startle, eyes widen as I realize what I just saw. The elusive green flash, the first I've ever seen, on the night of my goddamn wedding.

"I do!" Luffy cheers, jamming my ring on just a little too roughly.

"Congrats. You're married now. Is this party gonna have booze?" Zoro's words are lost as Luffy grabs my face and surges forward to kiss me.

It is, unsurprisingly, kind of terrible. Luffy is sorta an awful kisser, he uses way too much force and our teeth clack off each other, and he doesn't do much except hold me there.

Still, it's lovely. The crew cheers while Franky is just sobbing as loud as he can manage. "Throw the bouquet!" Nami demands.

"What?! I worked hard on that!" Usopp squawks.

I ignore that and twist around so I can hurl it behind me over my head.

"OW!" Sanji yelps. When I turn back around he's on the ground rubbing his nose and holding the bouquet with an expression of pure confusion. "What's the point of that?!"

"Traditionally whoever catches the bouquet is the person who'll get married next. Guess that answers your question!" I cackle. Sanji sends me a look of disbelief as he clutches the bouquet closer.

"That was fun. Can we party now? I want cake!" Luffy proclaims, already jaunting away.

Just like that, we're in party mode. I have no idea how Sanji managed to make a full feast and a giant eight tiered cake without Luffy attacking it before the reveal, but I am most definitely

not complaining. Someone has poured me out a tall glass of schnapps and then a toast is being demanded of me.

"Fine, fine. Someone stop me before I get drunk tonight, I wanna remember this," I demand, jumping up onto the table. Both Zoro and Nami choke. "Uh — what do I need to make a speech about? We're here, you've witnessed something stupid, and now we're gonna use it as an excuse to party!"

Hollers and cheers sound as I jump off the table to wrap an arm around Luffy's shoulders. "Party! Party! Party!" he chants, pumping his arms.

"Look!" Chopper suddenly gasps, pointing over the side of the ship. We all turn and watch as the water, deep black as it's reflecting the night sky, starts to softly glow blue as waves start surging up against the ship and under it. "Those are jellyfish!"

Indeed, there's hundreds of little bioluminescent jellyfish in the water, pulsing faintly as they bump off our hull and light up the sea far around us.

"Woah," I breathe out, leaning over the rail to watch.

It's like a glowing blue sea of stars, like something right out of a Disney movie. I marvel at the sheer romance of it all — a little disappointed it's being wasted on the least romantically charged marriage I've ever witnessed or been a part of.

"Guess the Sea approves this union. Nobody can complain now," Sanji says in awe.

I throw my drink back and whoop. "Guess we're partying with the sea too then! Wedding of the century!"

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“This is nice. That was fun,” Luffy hums, flopping down onto the bench inside the aquarium bar beside me. I tear my eyes away from the single solitary jellyfish Usopp managed to scoop out of the water (and almost fell into the water for) to look at him.

I give him a big smile and go to take another sip of my schnapps before realizing it’s empty. I’m just a little past pleasantly tipsy here at the end of the party, and had retreated to the fish only minutes before he joined me, snuggled up in my tablecloth cape on the bench.

“You gonna regret this at all?” I ask, spinning my ring around my finger.

“Is it going to get in the way of my dream?” he asks, leaning his smile into his arm.

“No, I don’t reckon it will,” I chuckle.

“Then no, not at all. I like the idea of always being connected to you, even if I don’t really get how marriage does that,” he says quietly. “And I’m not gonna get in the way of your dream either, so we have nothing to worry about.”

I hum and lay on my own arm, mirroring his position. “Yeah, but my dream *is* you.”

“What do you mean? I thought your dream was to find out what the One Piece is?” he asks, brow furrowing.

“It is, but I literally can’t do that without you,” I point out.

He frowns. “Sure you could. That would kinda suck for me because it would make you the King of the Pirates but you could still do it—”

“Luffy,” I interrupt gently. “I don’t want to fulfill my dream if it’s not with you. If you’re not at my side I’m not doing it at all.”

“I don’t want you to give up your dream for me,” he insists.

I can’t help but laugh. “I’m not. *You* are my dream. If something happened to you I wouldn’t be on my way to Laugh Tale by myself, I’d be making sure you’re ok. If you died I’d be going to hell to get your rubbery ass back. I don’t have a dream if I don’t have you.”

He scowls at the fish for a second before giving me a determined look. “Fine. If that’s what you want, then me too. I can’t fulfill my dream without you, so don’t you dare go anywhere,” he demands.

I smile and run a hand through his hair. “Of course, my liege. My husband, my Captain, my King. I’ll be with you every step of the way, with me you’ll never go anywhere blind. I’m like… your eyes. Yeah, Eyes of the Pirate King.”

He chuckles. “I like that. You’re my eyes ‘cause you’re always watching out for me.”

“Of course I am,” I say warmly. “What else could possibly be more fun?”

He laughs and snuggles into my side. I can’t help but think that there’s something truly divine about the way he smiles at me as he starts inspecting the ring around my finger and comparing it to his identical one.

This is not in any way shape or form where I thought my life would lead. The jellyfish bobs past the glass and I have absolutely no complaints.

Chapter End Notes

Oh course there's art for this monstrosity, who do you take me for? Ed stays strapped during their own wedding pass it on. The guns were honoured guests. Will I ever bring this up again? Who knows.

Let's hear it for the 1 (one) singular piece of important plot dropped in this.

So, uh, sorry or your welcome; whatever helps you sleep better at night. See y'all Sunday. Happy Valentines day!

Chapter 85: Chapter Eighty Five: You Keep Doing What You Can

Chapter Summary

Banks - Lincoln

“A particularly determined dugong could shoot better than me, you aren’t special,” I snark back. “Alright, fuck meditation, I suck at this too.”

Chapter Notes

Just the Strawhats being the Strawhats, everyone's favourite brand of stupid.

This chapter goes out to my theorists and Devil Fruit nerds, I see you and I love you.

School could have at least lubed me up before it fucked me over but here I am, being absolutely ass blasted in the worst way. That is to say I'm buried under a mountain of work but at least next week is my reading week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So this Devil Fruit of yours, do you actually know how it works?” Usopp questions, leaning over me while I try to meditate.

“Not particularity. I figure I’ll approach using it the same way I approach everything, dick first and reckless, hoping for the best,” I respond mildly.

“That doesn’t seem smart,” he comments dryly.

“It’s worked so far, hasn’t it? I'm semi-decent with guns now, and I never really learned how they work either,” I say triumphantly, peeking at him from one opened eye.

We share a dubious look for a moment before we both dissolve into snickers. “I could still outshoot you any day, and guns are *not* my weapon of choice,” Usopp huffs, though he has a smile on his face.

“A particularly determined dugong could shoot better than me, you aren’t special,” I snark back. “Alright, fuck meditation, I suck at this too.”

“Have you ever considered mediating another way?” Usopp asks.

I furrow my brow. “Zoro said something about finding another way of meditation but I didn’t really get what he meant. He pushed me into the ocean immediately after, so I wasn’t in the asking mood.”

Usopp laughs, the traitor. “Sounds about right. This is exactly what I mean though, you can’t swim anymore which sucks, but now you have sick powers. I don’t see why you aren’t trying everything to figure them out.”

I sigh and flop onto my back, abandoning the meditation attempt all together. “I dunno, Usopp. I’ve never had powers to rely on before, and I *like* using my guns. I ate the fruit in a moment of desperation, but I don’t want that desperation to be all my fighting style amounts to,” I answer honestly.

He blinks and joins me on the ground. “I guess that sorta makes sense… but still. It’s a part of your arsenal whether you like it or not, so learn how to use it even if you’re not going to,” he advises.

“And how do you suggest I go about that?” I inquire.

“Start using your abilities for mundane tasks until it becomes instinctive,” he responds immediately.

“You thought about this?” I ask, amused.

He flushes. “A little. I’ll help you if you ask,” he adds earnestly.

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah sure, Usopp. After a power nap, though. Meditation makes me tired.”

“Of course it does,” he huffs, but settles down beside me on the deck anyways.

I breathe in the crisp sea air and breathe it back out. The idle sounds of the deck lull me towards sleep just like they always do, and I drop down willingly.

“...Yeah Ed I can’t actually nap, my circadian rhythm won’t let me, we have to do this now,” Usopp interrupts, getting back up.

I groan long and loud then follow him.

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“Let’s start with this; what do you know for sure that your Devil Fruit can do that you’ve already done?” Usopp says, looking and sounding pompous as he waves around my pointing stick at my chalkboard, his spine drawn straight and a poor imitation of an scholarly look on his face.

He had commandeered my half of the library and dismantled my conspiracy board with startling efficiency, flipping the chalkboard from the side covered in my scrawled conjecture to the other and wiping the shitty drawing of a magnifying glass Franky has left on it without hesitation.

“If you don’t get this room back exactly as we found it, I’m gonna be mighty upset,” I say snootily, crossing my arms and leaning back in the swivel rolling chair I had demanded be added to the room. Mostly so I could slide around with the waves, if I’m being honest.

“I will,” Usopp mutters, deflating a bit. “Now answer the question! What can you do and how can we push it to its absolute limit!”

I roll my eyes but get onto the explanation regardless. “First thing I did was turn my own sense of gravity. Er — actually…” I trail off, furrowing my brow. The first and second time I felt my powers activate hadn’t been of my own volition.

“Actually..?” Usopp prompts.

I blink. “I felt it first when I tripped, which is painfully on brand, but nothing came of it. The second I managed to evade an attack, but I don’t really know how. I didn’t *feel* myself move but that doesn’t necessarily mean I didn’t, but I didn’t have contact with the guy attacking me so I *couldn’t* have affected him,” I explain.

Usopp hums and taps his lip with my stick. “Strange. But you said you changed your own sense of gravity?”

I nod. “Yup. I threw myself out a window and just kinda… I dunno how to explain this. Grabbed? My centre of gravity..?” I feel out slowly.

Usopp shrugs and writes the word gravity, followed by self in parentheses, on the chalkboard. “Ok… so your turning ability can manifest itself in a, let’s call it… non-material fashion.”

“I looked it up in a Devil Fruit Encyclopedia. Allegedly it can be used on the theoretical and physical,” I supply. “Oh and — I completely forgot about this — there was a woman who had the fruit, she turned an entire island upside down. It was mentioned in a book I sequestered from Alabasta.”

He pauses in writing that out. “Would that be in here?”

I start and remember we're in the fucking library and go lunging for the shelves. "Bingo!" I cry, yanking the volume from its place on Nami's side of the room.

Lost Archeological Sites and Their Significance; A Complete Guide stares back up at me and I give over to a second of nostalgia, remembering reading it for the first time in the grand library of Alabasta.

"Lemme see," Usopp demands, snatching the book from my hands and rifling through it. "Uh… Ploceidae Island? This doesn't really say anything about the fruit… I mean if this Eibara Bishop lady managed to turn a whole island though, imagine what *you* could do."

I frown. "What does that mean? What *I* could do?"

He gives me an exasperated look. "Ed I don't know if you've noticed, but you're kind of batshit insane. This idea lives in your head now, for better or worse you're gonna act on it one day and I only hope I'm nowhere near when you do."

I kick him from my chair. "Don't make me sound predictable! And I'm not gonna turn a damn island, I don't have a death wish and that is *waaaay* out of my purview!"

Usopp blocks with the book. "Geez — fine! Then back to where we were. Does the gravity thing only work on yourself?"

I snort. "Nah, I can use it on other people. I sent this Marine fucking flying, it stopped working at some point and he fell in the water though."

He hums and fidgets with his piece of chalk. "Do you think it's time based or distance based? You said it required physical contact, but if it works on people and or object when you're not directly touching them, we need to find the limit," he reasons.

"And your suggestion?" I ask, leaning forward.

He gives me a wicked smile. “Experimentation, of course.”

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“I feel it impertinent to ask whether starting with a human subject is wise,” I say imperiously, hands on Sanji’s shoulders while he gives Usopp a death glare.

“I have to agree,” he grits out. Then he glances back with an adoring look. “Not that you could possibly do anything wrong, my darling.”

“Yeah, don’t you trust Ed? Would Ed hurt you?” Usopp says dismissively.

“Uh — Ed here, I don’t know what I’m doing. No one should trust this idea,” I interrupt.

Usopp waves his hand. “It’ll be fine. Let’s start with a single turn, just flop him sideways and we’ll see if it’s time or distance,” he commands, finishing pinning the tape measure to the deck.

I huff a sigh and squeeze Sanji’s shoulders. “Last chance to back out. You, like, *really* don’t gotta do this.”

Sanji rolls his shoulders and takes a deep breath. “Nah, it’s fine. Ok, tilt me.”

I roll my eyes. “If you die, I’m not taking responsibility. Aight, ready for takeoff!” I announce, grabbing onto Sanji’s intangible centre of gravity and turning it.

He shrieks as he abruptly leaves my hands and falls sideways across the deck.

Usopp stares intently between Sanji and his stopwatch, then stops short when Sanji smacks into the wall of the cabin. “Ok, the deck was not at all big enough for this experiment.” Sanji lays prone on the wall for a long moment before flopping down into the grass. “Ten seconds exactly, though. Safe to assume it’s time based then!” he says cheerfully.

We leave Sanji groaning on the ground to move to our next experiment.

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“So when you say ‘turned his stomach,’ do you mean literally or just like… induced the feeling?” Usopp inquires.

“It’s hard to say,” I respond, picking at my lip. “I don't think a person would survive getting their stomach turned like a washing machine, but it was *Luffy.* He’s not exactly your run of the mill specimen.”

“Chopper! We have a medical question that needs answering and need of an x-ray machine!” Usopp announces as we barge into Chopper’s sick bay.

Chopper looks up from where he’s scribbling notes in a little notepad with a question in his eyes. “Do you? Franky got some new equipment for me that I’ve been meaning to use to update all your medical files, an x-ray machine included.”

“I love you but if you try to have my bloodwork done I’ll vomit on you,” I say firmly.

Chopper sends me a look but acquiesces. “So who am I x-raying?”

“LUFFY!” Usopp and I both holler out the door.

Chopper gets a grim look on his face. “Oh no.”

Luffy all but crashes through the door with a live fish in his mouth, still flopping around and smacking him with its tail. He spits it out over the rail and turns to us with a blinding grin. “Hi! What’s up?”

It’s a testament to our tolerance for bullshit none of us even blink at that. “Remember that weird thing I did when we were talking to Coby? We wanna try it while he x-rays you so we can see what goes on with your stomach,” I explain.

Luffy shrugs. “Sure, why not. You got a bucket in here?”

Chopper glances between us with a grimace. “I… I’m reevaluating my participation in this.”

“Don’t worry, doc. Just do your job,” Usopp says with a leer.

With Luffy set up behind the machine and Chopper and Usopp monitoring it closely, I place my hand on Luffy’s shoulder and give him an apologetic look. “Sorry.” Then I turn his stomach just like I did before.

Chopper makes a sound of interest that is covered up by Luffy puking his guts up into the bucket he had been holding.

“Uuuuugh — yeah that works. Can I not do that again?” he requests while I wipe his face off with a tissue.

“Yeah, no problemo. What’s the diagnosis, doc?” I ask.

“Well there was a reaction, certainly, but his stomach didn’t… turn, per say. So I’d say this technique of yours would not kill a normal person, since it works on a purely theoretical level,” Chopper concludes, writing a note in his pad.

“Did you just add that to my file?” I ask incredulously.

Chopper shrugs. “You never know when you’ll need an unobtrusive technique to induce emesis.”

I make a face. “I don’t want to be known as a vomit inducer, if it’s all the same.”

Chopper gives me a sly smile. “Well, you should have thought about that before coming to me for help,” he says lightly. When did Chopper get so… devious?

“Can I go back to fishing?” Luffy cuts in.

_____

“Can you turn the ground with any contact, or does it need to be your hands?” Usopp asks as we move back onto the deck.

I tilt my head back and forth. “I dunno. It’s worth a shot? As far as I’ve observed, clothing and such don’t impact a Devil Fruit’s ability, and sometimes mesh with them. Take a Zoan transformation or Buggy for example. Their clothing isn’t obliterated by their abilities, and appears unaffected after the fact.”

Usopp nods along. “Try it then,” he invites.

I march over to where Zoro is napping and tap my foot into the ground. We start spinning like a lazy susan and I note with interest that the section of the rail Zoro was leaning on moves with us. “Huh. That’s cool,” I murmur.

“Think fast,” Zoro pipes up, not even opening his eyes.

Then I'm falling over the side of the ship toward the ocean.

"ZORO YOU MOTHERFUCKER!" I yell up, violently jerking my centre of gravity to the side and yelling again when my head smacks into the side of the ship.

"Your own fault! Don't fuck with me if you're gonna leave yourself open!" Zoro calls back as I start trudging back up.

"You suck," I say matter of factly, laying down and grabbing onto the rails as I turn my gravity again, wheezing when my back slams into the grass. Going around corners is so much harder than you'd think it would be, and I am anything but smooth with it.

"Hey! Are you destroying my ship already?!" Franky hollers as he appears out of the aquarium bar.

"I'll fix it!" I groan, slapping my hand into the ground and spinning it back into place. "See? All good!"

"Don't go rearranging my baby, I worked hard on her," he grumbles, crossing his arms.

"And you did a wonderful job," Robin says, breezing down the stairs toward us. "Though I have to ask, was putting the library where Ed hoards the best idea?"

Franky shoots me a death glare and I duck behind my hand. "Er… it kind of *was* a poor design choice..?" I mumble, slowly inching away from him.

"Oh? Was it?" Franky says slowly, taking one single step towards me.

I take my cue and sprint out of there like my life depends on it, dragging Usopp by the wrist.

———

“So what haven’t we covered?” Usopp asks, both of us crouched in the aquarium bar while I stare at my little jellyfish.

“We established that contact through clothes and shoes counts as contact,” I start. “How far do you think that stretches? Like, could I theoretically redirect my bullets if I was touching my gun? Would I need to touch each individual bullet for it to be established? Am I gonna have to learn the art of lightning fast reloading?”

Usopp hums. “I have a dartboard down in my workshop we can use to test that theory.”

One quick jaunt down into the belly of the ship (sneaking past Franky because I’m 90% sure there’s a brig somewhere on this ship I haven’t found yet that he would stick me in and lecture me about his design choices for hours) and we’re ready to shoot.

“Maybe just try shooting it first and trying to… I dunno, feel the bullet?” Usopp suggests, standing clear of our makeshift gun range.

I shrug. “As good a suggestion as any.” I aim my gun at the target and shoot. It definitely doesn’t hit the centre, but it strikes close enough. I keep my focus on the bullet as it leaves my gun, which results in a whole lot of fuck all. “Yeah, that did nothing.”

“Did nothing because you couldn’t feel the bullet, or nothing because it didn’t work?” Usopp asks shrewdly. “C’mon, just think about how menacing you’ll be when you can actually hit the things you’re shooting at.”

I roll my eyes at him but give him the benefit of the doubt and resolve to try again. This time I start with the focusing — feeling the weight of my gun and how it feels in my hand. I take a deep breath in and let it out, trying to… I dunno. Wrap my powers around my gun or something?

Once I feel I have something of a handle on it, I fire at the target again. Ironically it hits further than the first shot, but… well it's almost like I can feel the bullet as it travels. Like it and I are connected by something immaterial but profound that couldn't be put into quite the right words.

"You got that look on your face like you did something cool and are surprised by it," Usopp remarks.

"Because I did," I chirp, adjusting my hand and firing again. The bullet hits dead centre this time, arcing through the air and correcting its course at my own insistence. "I just turned on auto aim."

"I don't know what auto aim is, but you just got a lot scarier," he chuckles nervously.

I give him a shark toothed smile. "Find comfort in it or not, this only works if you're within ten seconds of shooting range."

Usopp gulps. "Yeah I don't think that helps."

———

"Is there anything left to test?" Usopp mumbles, wiping foam off his face after having chugged a milkshake Sanji sent down once we were back in the aquarium bar.

I take a leisurely sip of my own. "I mean, we could just keep getting more and more theoretical until I'm doing world breaking bullshit, but it may be best for everyone involved if I stay clear of that."

"Have you tried using your powers in an isolated way?" Robin inquires, suddenly appearing and leaning down in between Usopp and I. We both scream, of course, and she chuckles. "It would be quite interesting to see if you could twist someone's arm clean off while the rest of their body remained motionless."

“Sweet fuck, Robin,” Usopp swears. “Where did you come from?!”

“I’ve been here the whole time,” she says mildly.

“Did you say I should twist someone's arm off?” I ask, bewildered. “I dunno if I can handle the… goriness of that. The blood from shooting people is kinda enough for me.”

She just shrugs. “Breaking limbs, then. Less gore, similar effectiveness.”

“I’m not kidnapping someone to test this on. I have standards and morals, and torture does *not* agree with me,” I say warningly.

She chuckles again and shakes her head. “No need for that when we have a man with unbreakable bones on board.”

Me and Usopp both half turn to each other before throwing our heads to the door. “LUFFY!”

He pops up faster than he did the first time. “Yeah? You gonna do something weird to me again?” he asks, sounding delighted by the prospect.

“Yup. Gimme your arm,” I demand, holding my hands out.

He does so without hesitation. “So what are you trying this time — oh WOW!” he gasps as he goes falling upwards to the ceiling, only being stopped by my tugging him back down by the arm.

“Woops, sorry,” I mutter, refocusing to turn his gravity the right way. It’s kinda hard to switch to turning something else now that I’m accustomed to doing it with gravity. I focus my

attention more intently on just his arm and instead of going for gravity, just start turning the arm itself.

"Oooh, that feels weird," Luffy giggles as his arm twists around. "Can you make it whirl like a windmill?"

"Oh boy can I!" I cackle, moving my hand up to his shoulder and going whatever the power version of gassing it is. It's weird, while I'm only focusing on his arm itself, it still feels like there's a connection to his body as a whole. I wonder what would happen if I severed that connection…

Usopp screeches as Luffy's propeller arm smacks him right across the nose, reeling back so hard he topples over off the bench. "OW! Experiments aren't supposed to turn living weapons on the experimenters!"

I drop my control of Luffy's arm and it slows to a stop. "Does that feel like it's turning your arm in the socket *literally,* or just like, metaphorically?" I ask, kinda… prodding at the connection of arm to body.

He shrugs. "It felt like it usually does when I wind my arm up. Hey can you spin my head? I wanna scare Zoro."

I snicker. "It'll only last for ten seconds after I let go," I warn, already grabbing him by the neck to do it.

He grins at me. "That's long enough." I set his head spinning and he bolts for the door, getting disoriented and slamming into a wall. "Ow."

Me, Usopp and Robin all exchange a look and burst into laughter.

_____

“Ed, I heard you were experimenting and I want you to test something for me,” Nami announces, cornering Usopp and I as we enter the deck.

Me and Usopp exchange a look. “Take off half my debt and I’ll allow it,” Usopp says imperiously.

“What? No,” Nami spits incredulously.

Usopp sighs dramatically. “Then I guess so experimenting for you.”

She scowls. “One sixth,” she bargains.

“Two fourths.” Usopp rebuffs.

“That’s still half, nimrod. A fifth,” Nami shoots back.

“Four eights, final offer,” Usopp declares.

“One third, final offer,” Nami proclaims.

“Deal,” Usopp says smugly.

“Did I just get used as a bargaining chip?” I mumble.

“I need to see if you can curl my hair with your powers,” Nami states.

I blink at her. “That’s it?”

She blinks back with a look. “What do you mean, *that’s it?* This could open a whole new avenue for my haircare.”

I don’t have a decent response for that. “Ok, sit down. I’ll see if I can’t make something work,” I sigh.

Nami happily perches on a lawn chair and I put my hands on the very top of her head. I let my awareness spread down her hair until I feel like I have a grasp on it. Then I start trying to turn the hair. It uh… kinda works? I try just turning it like it’s in curlers or something, and it kinda does.

“I didn’t actually expect that to do anything,” Usopp admits. “Wait, could you put my hair in twists like this? Nami had a point, this could revolutionize hair maintenance.”

I let go of Nami’s head and she starts looking it over in a compact mirror. “Wow, this is actually kinda cute,” she murmurs appreciatively. Unfortunately, ten seconds after the fact all her hair falls back down flat. “Aw what? That’s such bullshit.”

I shrug a little helplessly. “If you secure the hair before my control runs out, twists could still work.” Then I blink. “Wait, I’m not being conned into being your personal hairdresser! Back, you vultures!”

_____

“Today was so productive,” I murmur, snuggling into bed with Luffy following suit.

“I kinda liked being experimented on, it was fun,” Luffy chirps, hanging his hat off the hook on the wall.

“Only you would say something like that,” Nami grouches from her bed.

“When you’re more certain your abilities won’t cause me permanent damage, I’d be honoured to let you use them on me,” Robin says pleasantly from hers.

“Thanks, Robin. That means a lot,” I say, half sarcastic, half earnest.

“I try,” she croons back.

“Worst comes to worst, the next guy we fight will be shaped weird after you’re done with him!” Luffy says cheerfully.

“We’re gonna have to petition the Marines to change your epithet to Disfiguring Detective,” Nami snickers.

“You’re all the worst and if you don’t stop I’ll disfigure *you,”* I say mildly.

“Goodnight,” all three of them chorus at once.

“That’s what I thought.”

Chapter End Notes

Ed is, at the end of the day, a big dumb dumb with absolutely no idea how theoretical or practical physics works and will continue to function like an unmitigated fucking disaster until the end of time. Thanks for coming to my TED talk.

I missed Ed and Usopp shenanigans so much they mean everything to me.

Remember nerds, no Wednesday updates :(. See you next Sunday!

Chapter 86: Chapter Eighty Six: Darling, Play Your Violin, I Know It’s What You Live for

Chapter Summary

Because Dreaming Costs Money, My Dear - Mitski

“But… barrel…” Luffy says slowly. “Can we just like… fish it up? I won’t open it?”

I squint at him. He blinks innocently. “I don’t believe you,” I respond just as slowly.

Chapter Notes

DAAAARLING. GUESS WHO'S BACK FROM JAAAAAAAAIL!

Hi guys I missed you. I didn't actually go to jail we just on this once a week update shit. I can't say I love it but it's unfortunately for the best. BUT IT'S READING WEEK BABYE WHICH MEANS I MIGHT ACTUALLY GET SLEEP! At least after I get over this bitchass cold. The universe is saying mama pick a struggle and my ass said NO!

Thriller Bark is fighting me every step of the way but reading back some of this shit it's funny as hell and super camp so I'm coping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ed, I am enamoured and bedazzled by your departure into goth fashion,” Nami deadpans.

I frown at her and look down at my outfit. “It’s not really goth, but thanks?” It’s really not. I mean I’ve got a fishnet shirt on under a black bralette and that’s about as close as I’m getting. Maybe it’s the mustard coloured trench coat? “It’s more alt than anything. I’m trying to embrace my eyebrow slit.”

Nami just shrugs. “It’s cute.”

“So is your hair. It’s nice up,” I compliment.

She bats her eyes at me. “Aw, Ed—”

“Hey! Something’s floating in the water!” Zoro’s voice suddenly hollers over the intercom.

I blink rapidly as me and Nami run for the rails and peer into the water.

“That barrel says treasure!” Luffy shouts with glee. “You think it came from that treasure ship Robin was talking about?”

“Treasure?!” Usopp and Chopper cry.

“I dunno. Probably alcohol or preserves,” Nami muses.

“I vote we leave that alone!” I announce. I’m met with blank stares and confused noises. “That thing is dressed up like an offering! You want to steal an offering? What are you, heathens?”

“Seems spot on. Looks like someone was doing barrel drifting, an offering to the sea gods for safe passage,” Nami explains in response to the boy's confused looks.

“But… barrel…” Luffy says slowly. “Can we just like… fish it up? I won’t open it?”

I squint at him. He blinks innocently. “I don’t believe you,” I respond just as slowly.

“Would I lie to you?” Luffy asks rhetorically.

“Yes. Yes you would,” I deadpan.

“I fished the barrel up!” Franky announces.

“Traitor!” I bark while Luffy cheers and jumps for joy. The evil barrel of indeterminate evilness is plopped right in the middle of our deck and I gently kick Luffy away from it with suspicious, narrowed eyes. “I don’t trust this thing as far as I can throw it. Bad vibes.”

“So, alcohol. Let’s drink it,” Zoro says with a smirk, reclining on the bench around the main mast.

“Dumbass! You’d get cursed for something like that!” Usopp yelps.

“If we pray before we drink it, it’s probably fine, right?” Nami hedges.

“I don’t pray to gods,” Zoro snorts.

“You people are exhausting. A) We are not stealing an offering to the gods. B) We don’t know if this is a trap or not, and I’m not keen on fucking around to find out,” I say sternly.

“But Eeeeeed! It could have snaaaaacks!” Luffy groans.

“I seem to recall you being fine with us disrespecting a god up in the clouds,” Zoro says haughtily. “So why bother? God’s a jerk.”

“We don’t have to dwell up in the clouds, we fucking *live* on the sea!” I hiss, elbowing him when he reaches out to poke it.

“What’s the worst that could happen? It’s a *barrel,”* Luffy insists.

I grab him by the shoulders. “Luffy, look me in the eyes. That could have anything from a disease riddled hunk of meat ready to infect and kill us all, to an evil alien fetus also ready to kill us all. Or it could just be poison, in which case it could *kill us all.”*

Luffy stares at me for a second. “You know, you’re really paranoid sometimes. It could have something that won’t kill us, and we’ll never know if we don’t open it,” he grumbles.

I roll my eyes heavenward. “God give me patience. Luffy—”

Nami suddenly bursts into action. “Everyone to your posts! We’re fleeing southeast!” she yells. “The barometric pressure just plummeted, there’s a huge storm coming! ETA, five minutes!”

We snap into action following her lead. “I don’t see anything but if Nami says it’s coming, it’s coming fast. What’s our course?!” Luffy shouts.

“Bear to two o’clock!” Nami shouts back, just as the first raindrops start hitting the deck. “And maybe tie yourself to something?!”

Then the sky opens and starts wailing. In seconds we’re smack dab in the middle of a torrential downpour, thunder shaking the deck and green fucking lightning crawling across the sky. I shiver and whip my hair back, nearly losing grip of the rain slick ropes.

“No good! It’s all headwind!” Nami screams over the crash of thunder.

“You think that’s all this ship’s got?! Take up the sails! We’re using the paddles!” Franky announces.

“Wooooh paddles!” Luffy hollers. Whoever is on the wheel, I can’t see super well with all the rain in my eyes, switches the Soldier Dock System to channel zero and suddenly the ship is

zooming across the water.

It takes no time at all for us to clear the storm, dark almost black storm clouds giving way to a dense blanket of fog. “What the hell is…” Nami mumbles.

“Well fuck, out of the frying pan and into the fire,” I groan.

“What does that mean? Where are we?” Usopp questions.

“Ladies and worms, welcome to the Florian Triangle,” I proclaim, waving a hand at the ominous ass fog, “the creepiest place on the goddamn planet!”

And it most certainly is. The fog seems to press in at all sides, making our relatively large ship feel cramped and claustrophobic. The air itself is heavy with moisture and a looming sense of dread and I have to consciously keep taking longer and steadier breaths as the rest of the crew start shifting nervously.

“The *what?!”* Usopp yelps.

“Oh, right. You weren’t there. Basically ships go missing in here all the time and it’s super haunted and there’s ghost driven ships that carry corpses across the water,” Sanji says with a creepy grin, his lighter held under his chin to cast his face in eerie shadows.

“WHAT?! WHY DIDN’T ANYONE TELL ME THAT SO I COULD LIKE — *WARD MYSELF OR SOMETHING?!”* Usopp shrieks, scrambling across the deck to hide behind me.

“You can dance!” I blurt. Everyone sends me a strange look. “You can jive! Having the time of your life!”

“What are you doing?” Zoro deadpans.

“See that girl, watch that scene, digging the dancing queen!” I sing at the top of my lungs. “I’m a firm believer absolutely nothing can kill you if the vibes are wrong, so ABBA is the only solution! FRIDAY NIGHT AND THE LIGHTS ARE LOW—”

I get elbow deep in the most horrendous rendition of Dancing Queen the Grand Line has ever seen before Luffy starts dancing along. I don’t know who taught him how to do the sprinkler, but it was probably Shanks. That motherfucker.

“What is wrong with you two?” Nami asks miserably.

“I fully approve of this plan!” Franky laughs, joining in the dancing.

“I also like this idea!” Chopper yells, busting out into near perfect break dancing. Where the actual hell did he learn that?

Usopp hesitantly starts shuffling his feet before I’m grabbing him by the hands and spinning him around while screaming lyrics. The end comes faster than I thought it would, my voice fading out as the silence of the sea claws back in and I scramble for another song.

“Yohohoho, yohohoho…” a voice carries across the still air. We all freeze. “Yohohoho, yohohoho…”

We all slowly turn around as a fucking mammoth of a ship appears from the fog like a spectre, huge tattered and rotting sails and a hole riddled hull sliding through the water parallel to us.

“IT’S A GHOST SHIP!” everyone screams.

“THE ABBA DIDN’T WORK, ED! THE ABBA DIDN’T WORK!” Usopp wails, sinking to the ground and clinging to my leg.

“Yohohoho, yohohoho…” the voice continues as the ship drifts past. “Yohohoho, yohohoho…”

“We’re gonna die,” Nami blurts.

“Plug your ears, it’s a song of the damned!” Usopp wheezes. “If you listen you’ll be cursed!”

“I think it’s kinda nice, to be honest. Killer singing voice, literally,” I muse.

“What is wrong with you?!” he sobs.

“Is there someone on the ship..?” Robin breathes out.

Zoro pops his sword from its scabbard. “Can you… cut ghosts?” he asks slowly, a bead of sweat dripping down his temple.

“Something’s up there,” Sanji hisses.

Yeah, uh. Brook is up there. Drinking tea. All creepy like. Just, um, staring at us. As much as someone without eyes can.

“Gather up all of the crew… It’s time to ship out Bink’s Brew…” he sings in a slow, haunted tone. The ship passes by us without incident and we stare after it.

“Sea wind blows, to where who knows?” I muse in a whisper, blinking at the ship before turning back to my horrified companions. “So we’re definitely going on that ship, right?”

_____

"This is all your fault, Ed. It's because you promised Luffy you'd find him a living skeleton," Nami whimpers as me, her, Sanji and Luffy all climb the old ropes up onto the ghost ship.

"You could have stayed behind, it could have just been me and Luffy," I snicker, tossing her a grin over my shoulder. "It's really not my fault you suck at drawing lots."

"No! You two idiots cannot be trusted alone in a place like this, you'd do something crazy like getting our ship cursed!" she whines.

"It's ok. I'll protect you, Nami my dear," Sanji croons from beneath me.

"You think you can kick a ghost?!" she cries.

"You wanted to see the treasure ship, Nami," Luffy calls down.

"This isn't a treasure ship! You saw the moving skeleton, right?! RIGHT?!" she shrieks.

"Maybe he's the guardian of the treasure, let's find him first!" Luffy announces.

I finish laughing at Nami and look back to the top of the ropes where Brook is waiting, eyeholes staring down at us. "Oh, hi. You mind?" I ask, sticking my hand up to get pulled into the ship.

Nami screams.

_____

“Why, good afternoon! Yohohoho! Thank you for stopping by, you must excuse me for not greeting you earlier. I was quite surprised, it’s been decades, maybe, since I’ve seen a living person! I’m so used to ghost ships that humans frighted me, quite ironic isn’t it? Please, come in and have a seat!” Brook says cheerfully while we all stand at the rail, gobsmacked.

“It’s a singing talking afro skeleton!” Luffy hisses, shaking me with a wide grin.

“I’ll be damned,” Sanji breathes out.

“Your hair is amazing,” I tell him. I have to crane my neck because he’s so goddamn tall.

“Why, thank you very much! Was that your singing? It was quite lovely!” he laughs before pausing with his face turned at Nami. “Oh my! What a charming woman, so elegant! I’m all eyes for ladies like you. Or, I would be, if skeletons had any eyes! Yohohoho! Perhaps you’d be so kind as to show me your panties?”

Nami gets over her fear real quick to kick him in the dome. “YEAH RIGHT!”

“Yohohoho! How severe!” he laughs, going down hard. “I felt that right down to my bones! Because I’m a skeleton, you see.”

Me and Luffy burst out laughing. “How is his skull swelling?” Sanji asks faintly.

“Do you poop?” Luffy demands.

“That is the *last* question that needs to be asked!” Sanji shrieks.

“Oh yes, I poop,” Brook answers, dusting himself off and standing primly.

“Don’t answer that!” Sanji yells. “Anyway, how the fuck are you walking and talking, why are you here, and what the fuck happened to this ship?! Tell us what’s going on in these waters!”

“I got a better one!” Luffy announces. “Join my crew!”

“Yes, certainly,” Brook answers pleasantly.

“YES!” I holler, throwing my arms up.

“NO!” Sanji and Nami wail.

———

“Yohohoho! It’s a pleasure to meet you! It seems me and my ship caused a bit of a stir. Once dead and all bones, my name is Brook! How do you do?” Brook introduces.

“Are you kidding?! What the hell is this guy?!” everyone shouts.

“Oh my, tough crowd,” Brook muses.

“SK — SK — SK — SKELETON!” Chopper screams.

“A skeleton has no business walking, talking, or wearing an afro! It's a dream! It’s a bad dream!” Usopp shouts, decked out in a fancy hat, cloak, necklace of garlic, rosary, and a cross.

“Oh, really? That’s good,” Chopper sighs.

“Begone, foul spirit! Be gone!” Usopp hollers.

“Why hello, young lady. May I please see your panties?” Brook asks sweetly, leaning towards Robin.

“Stop that!” Nami demands, chucking her shoe at him.

“All of his jokes but that one are good, I promise,” I swear, grinning like a loon.

“Do you eat ribs?” Chopper asks hesitantly.

Brook pauses to think for a moment. “Yes.”

“Oh my god,” Zoro mutters under his breath. “Luffy what the fuck is that guy?!” he snaps.

“He’s funny, so he’s on the crew now,” Luffy snickers.

“NO! I expect a certain degree of idiocy from Luffy and Ed, but you two should have known better!” Zoro barks, jabbing his finger at Sanji and Nami as they hang their heads.

“We’re sorry,” they say miserably.

“I’m an enabler first and a planner second, let him COOK,” I say emphatically. “Look what he does when you let him *cook.”*

“LUFFY CAN’T COOK TO SAVE HIS LIFE! YOU LET A DEAD MAN ON THE SHIP!” Zoro yells, shaking me back and forth.

“Pardon me, I hate to interrupt, but why do you have that?” Brook interjects, pointing off to the side of the deck where the barrel from earlier is lying on its side, having gotten knocked about in the storm.

Luffy trots over and starts rolling it over and pushing it upright. “Fished it out of the water. Ed won’t let us open it,” Luffy explains, laying across the top so the flag draped over his head

“Damn right, I’m convinced it’s haunted and trying to kill us. No offence on the haunted bit,” I add.

“None taken. You are nearly spot on however, it may well be trying to kill you,” Brook reveals.

Everyone stares. “Ed was right?” Nami says in horror.

“It’s known to happen. Often, I might add,” I say defensively.

“Back to the matter at hand,” she says breezily, clapping her hands. I throw mine in the air. “You said the barrel is trying to kill us? How so?”

“It’s a flare, it’ll send out your location and put your ship under surveillance,” Brook explains solemnly. “You’d best leave that with me and try to escape these waters before you’re caught in its trap.”

“Trap?” Sanji asks with a confused tilt of his head.

“You’re coming with us, why would we leave the evil barrel with you?” Luffy adds, furrowing his brow.

“Ah, it is a truly joyous day to finally meet another person among the fog, and to even be invited to your crew… But I’m afraid I have to decline your invitation,” Brook says sadly.

“Nuh-uh. You already accepted! No take backs!” Luffy refutes.

“We don’t do refunds,” I add.

“Ah. Is that so?” Brook hums softly.

“Hold on, rewind, what the actual fuck are you and follow up question, is there a reason you don’t have a shadow?” Zoro interrupts, jabbing his finger at the conspicuous lack of shadow on the deck.

“Oh what the hell—” Nami yelps, jumping away from him. Usopp just screams and holds his cross in front of him like it’ll help.

“It was stolen,” Brook says simply.

“Yeah I’m gonna need more information than that,” Zoro deadpans, running a finger down the handle of his sword. I smack him.

“It’s a sad tale, one that begins with my death,” Brook says ominously.

“Yeah that makes total sense,” Usopp grumbles, then shrieks and dives behind me as Brook turns to look at him.

He chuckles a little bit. “You see, when I was still alive I ate a Devil Fruit, the Revive Revive Fruit. Many many years ago I was a pirate, and my crew sailed into these cursed waters. We

had an unfortunate encounter with a fearsome group of foes that annihilated my crew. I also died at that time!"

"Oh. That's… Sorry." Nami mumbles.

Brook waves her off. "I'll call it square if I may see your panties." Nami throws her other shoe at him. "Understandable. As I was saying, at that time my Devil Fruit's ability was activated and my soul returned from the underworld! As it stands, it was just simply too foggy on this sea and my soul got lost. By the time I managed to find my body a year later, it was nothing but bones!"

"You're just as bad as Zoro!" Luffy says brightly.

"Hey," Zoro grunts, cheeks going pink.

"So that's why you're a skeleton. Don't take this the wrong way, bro, but your power kinda sucks," Franky muses.

"No kidding. You're still cursed, you can't swim, and you're just a bunch of bones now," Sanji adds.

"Why do you still have hair," Zoro demands.

"The roots of my hair are strong," Brook states.

"Er — I've got a couple questions about that," I pipe up. "Hair should decompose by two years post-mortem, faster if it's exposed to elements, and should also have been attached to your clearly missing scalp. So, uh, why..?"

Brook just stares for a long long moment.

“Why do you know the rate of decomposition for hair?” Usopp murmurs from behind me.

“I had a phase. Robin, are you trying to carbon date him?” I ask.

“Hm?” Robin hums distractedly, peering at Brook in a squint. “What was the question?”

“Nevermind,” I sigh. “Please continue with your story, Brook.”

“Why thank you, uhhhh… I don’t believe I got your name,” Brook says pleasantly.

“Oh, right. I’m Detective E. D. Domino,” I say with a big grin, holding my hand out for a shake. “That’s Luffy, we’re married. Also I’m not a woman and if you ask to see my panties I’ll break you into pieces to play fetch with.”

“Hm. Noted,” he says slowly, shaking my hand. Wow that feels weird. “Being a skeleton and not having a shadow are two separate things. I’m afraid my shadow was stolen from me some years ago. As such, I no longer belong in the world of light. If my body is exposed to direct sunlight, I will begin to disintegrate.”

“Is it bad that this barely sounds weird anymore?” I mumble to Usopp, who just squeaks.

“I saw someone disappear in the sunlight before my very eyes, though I don’t have any. I also don’t appear in mirrors or photographs! My entire crew was annihilated! Once dead and all bones, my name is Brook!” he repeats, doing a little skeleton jig.

“Why are you so happy? Your life *sucks,”* Sanji asks incredulously.

“Optimistic vampire skeleton. And you doubted me,” I say smugly, elbowing Zoro in the ribs.

“This isn’t me doubting you, this is me being horrified by your actions, as always,” Zoro shoots back.

“I am thankful and blessed to meet you all here, on this sea where you can scarcely tell night from day, and for the first time in years I’m not lonely, or afraid, or ready to die! You are my beacon of hope in the darkness, if I had eyes I would cry tears of joy! But I just… can’t come with you,” Brook says mournfully.

“What?! No! No take backs!” Luffy repeats.

“The fog of this sea protects me from the sunlight. If I were to leave with you, eventually I would simply turn to dust. I must retrieve my shadow before I can leave, and you have provided me with the chance of a lifetime! Though I’ve lived a couple of those. Yohohoho!” Brook laughs.

“We have? Wait — this guy who stole your shadow! Who is he?! We’ll get it back for you!” Luffy proclaims.

Brook’s skeletal face almost seems astonished for a moment. “You’re a really good person. Even so, I cannot accept. We have only just met, you shouldn’t be prepared to die for me.”

“Is the enemy that strong? C’mon, just tell us the name at least,” Franky needles.

“I cannot! I must simply ask for your barrel and be on my way. Mayhaps once I’m free from this place we will meet again on the open sea, where sunlight cannot cause me harm,” Brook says wistfully.

“Nope,” I say, popping the P.

Everyone turns to me. “Nope?” Brook parrots.

“Nope,” I repeat. “If you wanna use our evil barrel, you gotta take us with you. Our Captain has made the decision and you’re part of the crew. And quite frankly you’re the coolest thing since Betty White, RIP, so you’re coming with us whether you like it or not.”

“Who’s Betty White?” Nami mumbles.

“Tell us everything we need to know about this shadow stealing asshole and we’ll have you fully SPF’d up in no time. To be perfectly frank, you don’t have a choice. We’ll find our way to this guy with or without your help, but we’d be a whole lot safer with the knowledge and your support,” I say pleasantly.

“We will?” Usopp yelps.

“We will! You’re already part of the crew, *no take backs,* so we’re helping you! Now who’s ass are we kicking?!” Luffy shouts, a wide smile firmly in place.

Brook gapes at us for a moment before sniffing and ducking his face away. “Ah. I see you have made up your minds already. Very well, I shall tell you what I know.” He straightens up and pulls a violin out of seemingly nowhere. “I will, of course, do this through song format!”

“What?” Zoro deadpans.

Sanji looks between us as Brook starts playing. “Are we suddenly in a musical?”

And then he starts to sing. He weaves a tail of a floating island from the West Blue, fashioned into a fearsome ship named Thriller Bark. He sings of ghouls and zombies, sewn creatures and experiments that can be bested with the power of salt. He sings of a castle and its guardians, of the fearsome swordsman who has his shadow, the ghosts, and the giant spider. And finally he sings of the being that dwells there, the lord over the shadows, Gecko Moria.

“Oh glory, another Warlord to add to our cache,” I say cheerfully as Brook closes out his song.

“WE HAVE TO FIGHT *ANOTHER ONE?!”* Usopp screams.

“I can’t wait!” Luffy laughs.

“I’d like to hear more about this swordsman…” Zoro murmurs with a wicked smirk.

“G — Ghosts…” Chopper whimper.

“G — Giant spider…” Nami whines.

“Just out of idle curiosity, how big is *giant?* ” Sanji squeaks.

“This is starting to sound like a super adventure!” Franky says with a grin.

“Zombies that can be purified by salt, hm?” Robin hums, thumbnail playing with her lip.

“How long have you been writing that and keeping it in your back pocket?” I ask out of curiosity.

“Far too long!” Brook says cheerfully. “But now that you know the dangers, I will not begrudge you if you turn away. This is a severe undertaking for someone you’ve only just met—”

“We’ll do it!” Luffy announces. “I wanna see zombies! Plus fighting a Warlord sounds fun. You can count on us, we’ll get your shadow no problem!”

Brook laughs. “Yohohoho! Then I suppose I am in your debt. Consider me and my sword at your disposal!”

Luffy whoops and jumps up off the barrel, but gets caught in the flag and falls over, ripping the lid off.

The sky lights up red as the fog swallows the flare that shoots up out of the evil barrel with a deafening bang.

We all stare at it, gap jawed for a second before moving to stare at Luffy.

“Haha. Oops?”

Chapter End Notes

I can do a great many things, writing a musical number is not one of them. I however do hold the stance that Thriller Bark should have been the musical arc. With a musical. Like a whole one. I rest my case.

Props to the folks in the comments giving me actual real and good advice on songwriting, but as it stands I haven't the talent nor time to write a musical number.

You may be wondering why I didn't name this chapter with Dancing Queen since it's quite literally used, and to that I answer this is quite literally my Brook theme. I can't NOT use it on his introductory chapter.

Real bad bitches make their friend rings in the shape of their star sign and friendship bracelets after their old ones wear off instead of writing to stave off the burnout. BBG if you read my fic like you promised you would know these gifts were coming but you're a bitch so you won't <3

OH I ALMOST FORGOT OFC THERE'S ART.

Chapter 87: Chapter Eighty Seven: The Dead Start To Walk In Their Masquerade

Chapter Summary

Thriller - Michael Jackson

"You're all exhausting and the best team I could ask for," I deadpan.

Chapter Notes

I had to with this chapter' song. I *had* to. Obligatory Thriller chapter. Unfortunately no synchronized dance from the zombies :(

Thriller Bark is so fucking funny and I am not doing it anywhere near enough justice. F.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I would like it on record I think your plan is bogus," Nami mutters, hugging Usopp to her shoulder.

"You can stay on the ship and help kill the invisible man if you want," I say pleasantly, patting my sachet of salt and making sure it's secure on my belt. "Like I said, if you want to switch with someone from the other team to keep it even I don't mind. We're all ending up on the island anyway."

Nami whimpers and drops her head onto Usopp, who just pats her hair.

"Finished locking up, little bro! This place is as secure as it'll get," Franky announces, returning to the deck and twirling a large keyring around his finger, Sanji right behind him.

"Amazing. You got the flour?" I ask, turning to Sanji.

He scowls and crosses his arms. “Yes, but I don’t see why we couldn’t use something not food based.”

“We didn’t have enough sawdust,” Franky groans, making a face like he’s been asked this repeatedly as they went about their task.

“Right. Ok. Well the ship is in your capable hands, we’re just in a waiting game for now,” I mutter, eyes scanning the foggy horizon. “Alright, we’re going down to the Soldier Dock System, we’ll be waiting on your cue.”

“I still don’t see why we gotta hide,” Luffy grumbles, following me and the rest of Team Spooky Scary Skeletons (you gotta love being able to name things) into the hatch in the grass.

“Because we need to throw off their count of us so we can take them by surprise,” I recite for the fifth time. “Just think of how funny their faces are gonna be when we show up outta nowhere.”

The plan honestly doesn’t hinge on it, we’ll be found out as soon as we’re on the island, but a headstart may well do wonders for our chances, especially with getting away from Absalom before he can sabotage us.

“I agree with Luffy. Let’s just attack the ghosts when they get here,” Zoro states.

“I don’t think you can cut ghosts,” Nami groans.

“No, I don’t believe you can,” Brook says lightly.

“You’re all exhausting and the best team I could ask for,” I deadpan.

“Oh my god look at that—” Nami cuts herself off with a squeal, running through door 2 of the Soldier Dock System and to our vehicle for this excursion. “The Mini Merry II is a paddleboat!”

“Now we can bring itty bitty Merry to the shore with us!” Luffy laughs, hugging her tiny head. “Look! We match!” he proclaims, comparing the paddleboat’s horns to his ring, which he’s taken to keeping on a chain around his neck.

“Twinning,” I sing with double peace signs.

“Looks like he really put his heart into the design,” Zoro muses with a smile.

“But it only has four seats, we’ve got an extra person,” Nami observes.

“Not to worry, I can run across the water,” Brook says brightly.

“You can what,” Nami deadpans.

“Well I’m all bones you see, so I’m very light,” he says, like it explains anything at all. Nami sends me a look of disbelief I shrug at.

“Are your bones hollow? Like a bird?” I murmur, giving him an appraising look. He stares blankly.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!” Usopp screams so loud it echoes all the way down here.

“Is that the signal?” Luffy asks, bouncing in place and making the little cage box thing he has ‘for catching ghosts’ rattle. He’s also got a butterfly net in hand and I can’t find it in myself to tell him they won’t work.

“No, not yet,” I say, looking up into the hatch and only feeling a little queasy knowing it was locked behind us. “Let’s get ready for a quick departure anyways. Everyone take your seats and keep all hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times.”

Nami hops right into the driver seat and I jump in beside her. “Why can’t I drive?” Zoro complains, getting in the back.

“Because you’d somehow manage to navigate us right out of the island's enclosed perimeter,” Nami bites back.

“I can’t wait to catch a ghost. How many do you think we need? What do ghosts do? I want a bunch for the crew,” Luffy babbles, bonking me in the back of the head with his net as he settles into the last remaining seat.

There’s another echoing shout from Usopp, followed by a dull thud, followed by the channel door opening. “That’s our cue, gas it!” I command.

“It’s a paddleboat, you don’t gas it!” Nami snaps, gassing it.

We zoom out of the hanger into foggy waters. Smoke is obscuring the deck of the Sunny while flashes and bangs go off inside when we glance behind, all according to plan, then we all turn towards our destination.

My jaw drops. A giant gothic cathedral stands amongst the fog, another huge shape obscured behind it. Thick chains dip down into our view and there’s a large wheel sticking out from the mire. Thriller Bark is huge, and it’s the sexiest ship I have ever seen.

“Thriller Bark? More like Thriller Barque,” Nami mutters.

“Holy fucking shit. Who cares if he’s evil, the man has *taste,”* I breathe.

“It does have quite nice aesthetics, doesn’t it?” Brook muses from beside me.

“No kidding,” Zoro murmurs before double taking. “Oh what the *fuck.”*

Brook is sprinting across the water keeping pace with us, his legs pinwheeling so fast they’re blurs.

“You’re literally the coolest person I’ve ever met,” I cackle.

“You may want to watch out for that moat, I don’t believe it has any water in it,” Brook points out.

“What moat—” Nami cuts herself off by driving full tilt into said moat.

We all get thrown from the Mini Merry II with screeches and screams. I smack hard into the muddy ground and groan when Luffy lands right on top of me. “Oh my god get ooooooff —”

“Sorry Ed!” Luffy snickers, rolling off me.

“That was 100% my fault, but you’ll forgive me because I’m cute, right?” Nami says slowly, batting her eyes at us.

Zoro tries to push her face into the mud. “No way! You would have killed us — what kinda navigator misses a moat they get warned about?!”

“Yohohoho! That was quite a stumble, is everyone quite alright?” Brook asks, landing softly on the ground beside us.

“We’re fine,” I mutter, flicking muck off myself.

“Hey, what’s that?” Luffy asks, pointing down the moat to where a shape is starting to lumber out of the darkness. Growls and a singular not growl sound from the creature.

“What in the Frankenstein's monster,” I deadpan.

“What the fuck *is that?!”* Nami screeches, pointing a shaking finger at it.

“A cerberus. Festive. Are we in hell already?” Zoro grumbles.

“I don’t remember this creature from my short tenure in the underworld, yohohoho!” Brook laughs. “I sure hope he isn’t too keen on gnawing on my bones!”

“Doggy!” Luffy cries. “You think it’s edible?!”

The three headed dog promptly stops being threatening and looks much more horrified by us. It gets worse when Luffy starts barking at the damn thing.

“Oh my god…” I mutter, shaking my head and ducking to hide my smile.

It quickly shakes its heads through, and starts growling anew, drawing up to be more of an imposing figure. “What’s up with this thing?” Zoro asks, popping his scabbard. “Let’s just…”

“No wait! I wanna tame it!” Luffy snickers, bounding forward and sticking a hand out at the dog.

“You think you can train this thing?” Zoro asks incredulously.

“A dog’s a dog! Ok, shake!” Luffy demands. The dog tries to eat him, because of course it does. Nami screams as it chomps down on his head, leg and arm. “Hey. Be a good boy, now let go. Good boy…” he says soothingly, patting it as it drops him in astonishment before fucking punching it in the face. “YOU ASSHOLE!” As it collapses into a heap on the ground Luffy sticks a hand out. “Down.”

“I — no,” Zoro mutters.

“That’s my husband. I married him,” I say faintly. I don’t know if I’m more proud or horrified by my life choices.

Nami stares into the sky with a strangely serene look on her face. “Ah, I see. It’s a dream. A very strange dream. There is no singing skeleton, or ghost island, or devil dog for Luffy to punch. I just had eighteen too many cocktails, of course.”

“Denial is a strong emotion. It’s almost impressive to sink this far into it,” Brook says keenly.

“So this is one of those zombie experiments? It’s a little lame,” Zoro muses as Luffy clambers onto the things head and starts ordering it around.

“I think the most impressive part is that it doesn’t smell like a rotting corpse,” I add.

“Thanks for that imagery. So to the mansion?” Nami asks trepidatiously, snapping out of her stupor.

“To the mansion!” I shout, pointing to the staircase.

———

I'm mumbling the lyrics to the Into the Woods soundtrack trying to ignore all of the weird shit in the woods we're romping through. Brook has started beatboxing at some point and I'm basically dragging Nami through by the hand while she keeps her eyes clamped shut to the horrors.

"That tree has a face. Anyone else see the tree with a face?" Zoro asks conversationally.

"Shut up. No there is not," Nami denies, holding my hand so tight bones creak.

Luffy gasps. "There's a unicorn! Hey do you think it would join our—"

"Stop fucking around! You can't recruit every dead looking thing we come across!" Zoro snaps.

"Says you," Luffy grumbles.

"You'd think with how annoying we're being, someone would've come to get us by now," I say with a frown. Where's the bat guy with the carriage? Isn't he supposed to show up and take the first group to the graveyard?

"You *want* more creepy things to find us?" Nami demands shrilly.

I shrug. "Might make this quicker. Or we could just light the forest on fire and hope Brook's shadow comes running to stop us."

"I'm certainly not opposed…" Zoro mutters darkly.

"I am! I don't know if any of you hooligans noticed this, but we are *inside the forest.* If you set it on fire *we will die,"* Nami says glibly.

“Then maybe we don’t do that,” I concede. “But at this rate we’ll never make it to the—”

“Graveyard!” Luffy cheers. We all look ahead to the break in the trees, where indeed a graveyard is waiting.

“Let’s not get too excited about the dead people,” Nami hisses.

“Is that a fucking ghost?” Zoro blurts. We all turn once again and yup — ghost.

“Negative, negative,” the ghost… says? Well it makes the noise, I dunno if that counts as speaking. Oh joy, now we get to experience negative hollows.

“GHOST?!” Nami screams, grabbing me by the shoulders and brandishing me like a shield. “NOPE! NO WAY! I’M NOT DOWN WITH GHOSTS! I THOUGHT IT WAS A JOKE!”

“I’m catching and keeping one!” Luffy announces, swinging at it with his bug net.

The hollow evades capture and splits in half, then splits in half again. The three hollows dance around our heads and wave their arms. When that doesn’t work, Luffy lunges with his arms open. The hollow, of course, goes right through him and he drops to his knees.

“If I get reborn… I hope I’m a clam…” he moans. “I hope I die!”

I snort and duck out of the way of one that swoops at me. “Oh, that’s fun.”

“Why does it look so stupid?” Zoro snorts. One of the hollows seems to take offence to this and flies right through his stomach. He flinches back and gets this queasy look on his face before he collapses onto his knees. “I’m not even fit to be dog food…” he whimpers.

I can't help but burst out laughing. Nami shrieks and dives out of the way of one of them and Brook neatly sidesteps another. "Zoro your *face!"* I wheeze.

That of course is when one sweeps down from behind me and flies through my damn head. I'm filled with the overwhelming sensation of disappointment, a hopelessness so powerful my knees wobble. Then I blink, shake my head, and shiver. "Oh. Ew, that felt gross," I gag, shaking my hands.

"Why did that not do anything to you?" Nami questions.

I shug. Wasn't Usopp able to resist these things because he's got anxiety out the wazoo? "Damn, maybe having mental illness really *is* a superpower. Fuck, I can't belive that child psychologist was right," I mutter under my breath. "Triple diagnosis at 12 for the *win."*

"AAAUGH! Next time I see those ghosts they're done for!" Luffy shouts, shaking his fists at the sky as the hollows retreat.

"That was something else, Zoro," Nami teases.

"SHUT UP!" Zoro snaps, face bright red.

"First creepy patchwork dogs, now ghosts… this ship island is fucking crazy," Nami mutters, eyes darting around the last of the trees distrustfully as we pick up walking again. "What's next, vampires?" She sends me an alarmed look. "There's no vampires, right?!"

"Not as far as I know..?" I venture. "Really though, what were you expecting? Sunshine and rainbows?" I ask rhetorically.

"It's quite unfortunate the ship is so gloomy, but I find the atmosphere lends itself to a particular kind of enjoyment, if you let yourself enjoy it," Brook says pleasantly. "One might even find themselves inspired, if they know where to look. Perhaps you'll find my strategy comforting, just sing and you'll forget all about the horrors!"

“Let’s have a picnic!” Luffy proclaims as we exit the break in the trees into the graveyard proper.

“That’s mad disrespectful, yo,” I joke. “Those dudes in the ground can’t eat anymore, you gonna rub it in their faces?”

Luffy frowns and scrunches his face, thinking for a moment. “Hm. Yes.”

I snort. “Oh, that’s so mean of you.”

A low moan sounds from the ground. We all pause and stare at it. A hand emerges, followed by a whole rotting guy.

Luffy stares at him.

He stares back.

Luffy slowly pushes him back into the ground.

He pops back up screaming a second later, but it’s enough to have me laughing so hard I’m getting stitches in my side. “A heavily injured old man..?” Luffy mumbles, making me laugh even harder.

“IT’S OBVIOUSLY A ZOMBIE!” Nami and Zoro both shout. I’m too busy wheezing to join them.

“Don’t underestimate zombies!” another few shriek as they start popping up out of the ground all around us, half of them literally doing flips and acrobatics.

“Uh, should zombies be this… energetic..?” Nami mutters.

“We’ll show you the danger of zombies!” one of them hollers, then they’re all lunging for us with great speed.

“Oh? Danger?” Luffy says with a smirk, cracking his knuckles while Zoro unsheathes his sword.

I grab Brook by the boney arm before he can move. “We kinda need directions, don’t kill ‘em yet.”

He inclines his head and removes his hands from the handle of his cane.

“So what’re you doing here?” Luffy demands once all of the zombies have been sufficiently cowed.

“Y’know… Zombie stuff…” one of them mumbles.

“Rotting…” another hedges.

“Yeah, me too,” another pipes up.

“Don’t fuck around,” Luffy says, tilting his head.

“SORRY!” they all yell frantically.

“Hey, hi. Living person here. We need directions to the mansion,” I cut in, leaning around Luffy.

“Oh. Uh — we’re kinda… not allowed to tell you..?” one of them croaks. Luffy cracks his knuckles and the zombie yelps. “Yeah we can do that!”

One of them leans over to the guy beside him. “Can they not… see the mansion right behind them..?” he whispers, clearly not aware how loud he’s being.

Everyone slowly turns to him. He slowly looks up. We all slowly turn around. The mansion is clearly visible through the fog. We slowly turn back.

“That’s that, then. Kill them again,” I order, face blank.

“So it’s clear why I missed the house, but why did our navigator of all people miss it? It’s sort of obvious,” Zoro muses as we walk away from the mound of purified zombies, salt stores just a bit lighter.

“Shut your trap. You have eyes, you nincompoop,” Nami snaps, then she frowns at the mansion. “Who do you think those guys were? Corpses have to come from somewhere.”

“It could be people who’ve visited the ship, but more likely, it’s Moria’s old crew,” I answer. “He faced off against Kaido back in the day. His crew got wiped out.”

“Kaido?” Luffy questions while Nami and Zoro choke on their breath.

“He’s one of the Emperors of the Sea. A real piece of work,” I reply. “Remember I told you about Whitebeard? How he’s an Emperor too? Yeah, Kaido is like him but if he was an asshole and not like him at all.”

Luffy hums. “Ah, ok. We’re gonna have to fight him then.”

Nami all but drops into a dead faint. Me and Zoro both lunge to catch her at the same time and end up only smashing our heads into each other and letting her fall into the muck. We both rear back with matching shouts.

Nami quickly scrambles to her feet, yelping and trying to get the mud off her everything. “Are you kidding?! Would it have killed you idiots to catch me?! Now I’m filthy!” she shrieks.

“Hey! Maybe if you weren’t being such a drama queen we wouldn’t have had to!” Zoro snaps back.

“And we did try to catch you, you ungrateful little shit! We’ve got the goose eggs to prove it!” I add, pointing aggressively to the red marks on Zoro and I’s foreheads.

“You’re all so lively! Also your friend ran off,” Brook pipes up.

We all whip our heads towards him then back towards the forest, then to the mansion.

“DAMNIT!” Zoro shouts.

“I was joking about befriending the bush people!” I groan. “Mostly. I mean, this is kind of alright? He’ll turn up eventually,” I bargain.

“When you said you were just gonna let him run wild and not hinge the plan on him in any way, I thought you were being funny. Or exaggerating,” Nami sighs.

“Nope, full blown serious. He really only came with this group because he wanted to and because I like having him around,” I say with a shrug and a smile.

Zoro groans long and loud into his hand. “Fuck. Fine then, the rest of us will continue to the mansion. If his shenanigans somehow manage to muck their way into that house, we’re doomed regardless.”

“Well said. Onwards?” I say brightly.

“Do you think they would let me change?” Nami asks disparagingly, staring down at her mud soiled clothes.

“Maybe. You can always ask,” Zoro says sardonically. Nami smacks him.

“And still we grown ever closer to our goal, I can feel it in my bones. Because I’m a skeleton, yohohoho!” Brook laughs.

“Having you around is a joy and a delight and I could not imagine leaving this godforsaken ship without you,” I tell him seriously.

“Ah, that is most kind of you, Detective Domino. It really warms my heart, or it would if I had one! Skeleton joke, yohohoho!” he continues.

I cackle as we continue up the path toward Hogback’s mansion.

_____

The gates to Hogback’s mansion are rusted, but open. The building is far from welcoming, despite that. The persistent fog still obscures much of the towering building that makes up the great mast of Thriller Bark, and the giant sail is finally visible above us.

“If it wasn’t so damn creepy, I’d find this place very impressive,” Nami mutters, still fruitlessly trying to scratch mud out of her shirt.

“I think it’s impressive regardless, at the very least a marvel of engineering,” I comment, mindlessly smudging a bit of muck off her cheek.

The entrance hall is tall and framed by pillars. Above the hall is the gear-shaped rose window, and above that the peak of the tower. The courtyard is clearly (as clear as anything with the ever present fog) visible on the other side of the hall, and there’s a well illuminated by a spotlight beside the door. Is Cindry still inside there? With us being the first group, will she be waiting for us?

“This is rather dramatic, don’t you think?” Nami sneers, peeking at the well like it’ll come to life and try to eat her if she gets too close.

Cindry chooses that moment to spring up from the well like a Jack-in-the-Box.

We all scream and take a giant leap back, but she makes no move to chase us — or fling the stack of plates in her hands at us.

“W — what the hell?!” Zoro hisses.

“Only two guests are permitted tonight,” she announces, not a single hint of inflection to her voice.

“Two?” Zoro mutters incredulously. “Why only two?”

“No problem, just me and Nami will enter,” I proclaim. When my compatriots start to protest I turn to them and put my back to Cindry so I can do the wait and stealth sighs at them. Brook cocks his head like he’s confused but Nami and Zoro both dutifully make the received sign.

“Does it have to be me?” Nami asks miserably. I shoot her a look and she deflates. “Yes, of course.”

“Would it be ok if Nami got changed and freshened up? She had a clumsy moment on our way here,” I ask with a winning smile, batting my eyes at Cindry’s stone cold expression.

She regards us for a long moment. “Very well. Dr. Hogback will be with you when he is available. You have come at an inconvenient time, he is in the middle of — well. Please come inside,” she says, voice robotic. Then she turns and opens the door to the mansion.

Me and Nami send loaded looks at Zoro and Brook, who wait obediently outside as we enter after her.

Some of Cindry’s movements are short and jerky, like she can’t quite remember just how long her arms are, or how far away from her they should rest. In other ways she is entirely graceful; the large stack of plates negligible, despite definitely weighing a lot. There’s an assuredness to her steps that comes from some kind of latent muscle memory, especially while carrying so much.

Observing her in this way only makes me sad. I shoot a look at Nami and her eyes flash as she casts an intense gaze at Cindry’s back. She understands just as I do; we need to purify her as soon as we can.

She leads us through rooms and halls packed full of zombie portraits, rugs, and accoutrements. Nami keeps inching closer and closer to me until I gotta gently shove her away so I don’t get covered in graveyard muck too.

I nearly bowl Cindry over as she comes to an abrupt stop in the hall just outside a pair of french doors with curtains covering the glass from the inside, nestled inside an alcove with towels and laundry baskets.

“We’re here. Please feel free to wash up and borrow some clothes,” she invites blandly.

Me and Nami exchange a look. “Oh Cindry, would you please help me with the washing? I’ll need someone to wash my back and my hair is going to take a lot of work. It would be so

helpful if you say yes," Nami croons, turning the puppy dog eyes up to 1000.

Cindry doesn't blink but she stares long enough to give the impression. "Very well," she says eventually and I tamp down the urge to cheer.

"I'll stand guard — I mean stay out here! I love you Nami, but I don't fancy being in your debt for seeing you naked," I say pleasantly.

"Wonderful idea, Ed," Nami says breezily, taking Cindry by the arm and making a strange face at wherever she feels, then pulling her into the bathroom and closing the door behind her.

I stand in the hall with one ear pressed to the door, so I get a great listen but not a look at the sounds of smashing plates, a little muffled screaming, and the heavy thud of a body hitting the ground. I wait a second before knocking on the door. "You ok in there?" I call.

"Absolutely peachy!" Nami calls back, slightly out of breath. "A warning about how strong that chick was would have been helpful, I only managed to salt her by catching her so off guard!"

I start snickering before I hear something down the hall. I fall abruptly silent and press myself back into the alcove sheltering the door as something — someone? Comes slowly thumping down toward me. I consider briefly ducking into the bathroom with Nami, but stop when I catch a glimpse of who it is.

A long red coat, long pale pink hair, two swords through the stomach and a bottle of alcohol held loosely in his gnarled hand.

I step out into the hallway with slow measured steps. "Aren't you…" I trail off, squinting at him.

He twists sunken features into something like a smirk. “Captain John,” he says in an easy slur, dipping into a clumsy but practiced sweeping bow that I can't help but feel is condescending, “not quite at your service.”

Ah. “Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

I've got my first portfolio interview tomorrow but I've already gotten accepted into the program so I'm only a lil stressed wooooooooooo.

Do you know what the plan is? No. Am I going to make obscure references to what the plan is without telling you? Hehe. Maybe.

Chapter 88: Chapter Eighty Eight: Show Them All You're Not The Ordinary Type

Chapter Summary

Let's Kill Tonight - Panic! At The Disco

I take a deep breath and try to centre myself like I'm meditating. My skill with my Devil Fruit has been preliminary at most so far, but at this point anything will have to help. "Bring it on."

Chapter Notes

Y'all I am so mad. That fucking portfolio interview I was chatting about last time got cancelled because I got a free ride into the program and they DIDN'T TELL ME. Like I got in so yay but REALLY? I was so stressed for NOTHING. Anyway I have two more interviews this week that are 100% for real happening. Continue to pray for me my loves.

I WANNA FINISH WRITING UNTIL THE TIMESKIP BEFORE TAKING A BREAK AND I'M GONNA MAKE IT OR DIE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We can do this one of two ways," Captain John, formerly of the Rocks Pirates, proclaims in a haughty slur. "You can just stand there lookin' dumb and I can kill you quick and easy, or you can hightail it out of here and I'll be forced to slice you six ways to Sunday with the promise to make it hurt. I don't want to be doing any more work then a have to, and you've already fucked that up by walking into my path."

I blink slowly at him, purposefully keeping my eyes off the door Nami is behind so I don't draw attention to it. For her sake, I'm gonna keep this lunatic away from her. "Can I have the secret third option?" I ask.

He seems to consider it for a second. "No."

There’s no way in hell it’s midnight yet, so the fact that one of the zombie generals is up and about is a little worrisome. I guess I’m just gonna have to hope I, A) don’t run into the rest, and B) that Moria isn’t awake yet.

I sigh. “Well, it seems we're at an impasse. I’m not gonna let you kill me, and you’re disinclined to let me live.”

“Disinclined is a nice word for it,” he drawls. “So am I correct to assume you’ll be difficult, then?”

I shrug. “If you're gonna force my hand, it seems I will be.”

He takes a long sip from his bottle, booze overflowing and spilling down his front. “Very well. You oughta know though, I was once a pretty famous big shot pirate. Last chance to back down.”

I scoff. “Yeah I know who you are. Your claim to fame is belonging to a destroyed crew and being murdered by your own in a mutiny. Oh, and being a drunk. I’ll take my chances.”

To be perfectly frank, this guy could kick my ass. But he’s notoriously lazy, right? If I put up enough of a fuss he might just fuck off.

“I had a pretty good stash of treasure too,” John chuckles, and draws one of the swords from his stomach. “You’ll pay for that insult in blood,” he promises.

I take a deep breath and try to centre myself like I’m meditating. My skill with my Devil Fruit has been preliminary at most so far, but at this point anything will have to help. “Bring it on.”

I try something weird. There’s a solid 20 feet or so between us, which will make it the biggest radius I’ve attempted to work with so far, but I plant my feet into the ground and call up my

powers. Keeping my control isolated to just the floor takes more concentration than I was expecting, but I push through.

I spin the floor like a record. John's face barely gets to grimace in surprise before he's being absolutely body slammed into the wall (opposite the bathroom Nami is hiding out in) and gets halfway lodged inside. I turn the floor back just a bit, and slam him in again for good measure, this time sending him right through the wall.

The lights flicker, and half of them in the hall go out.

There's silence for a second and out of the corner of my eye I see Nami's confused face appear in the door as she moves aside the curtain. I make the danger sign without looking at her, followed by the wait sign.

In the dim light and low dusty cloud left by the broken wall, a cackle sounds. My shoulders hitch up almost of their own volition as the sound grates on my ears, my fight or flight kicking into high gear for a reason I can't name.

"Oh, kiddo," John drawls. "You're gonna regret that."

I find myself agreeing, so I turn the other way and book it.

"Wha — aye?!" he squawks, and I hear the sounds of him following me as I run around the corner. I yank a large candlestick thingy off the ground and wind up like a baseball player, turning its gravity to increase the power behind the swing.

He comes barreling around the corner and I Looney Toons brain him. In the face. With the candle holder stick thing.

There's an incredibly loud resound twang as his head snaps back and his body crumples to the ground. I stare at him for a second as he lays still. "Oh. Did that work?"

His body doesn't reply. I shrug and dig into my pouch for some salt. Predictably, though not to me because UH-—

He takes that moment to attack. I'm wrist deep in my pouch when he pounces, and salt goes spraying all over the hall as I find myself pinned to the wall by a sword clean through my shoulder. This triggers a lot, and I mean A LOT, of screaming from me.

You'd think after all the shit I've been forced to endure over the last few months a little stabbage wouldn't be so bad, and honestly it's not the slicing pain of having a sword embedded in the meat of my shoulder that bothers me, it's the being pinned part.

His second sword jams through my other shoulder as I go scrambling for my gun and I scream again as it scrapes across bone. John laughs and rests his elbows on either sword, leaning into my space and causing agony to lance through me.

I strangle the noise my body tries to make in my throat and take a swift moment to panic because if he can lean his fucking weight on the swords they've got to be embedded pretty fucking deep in the stone.

"That wasn't cool of you," John tuts, his breath fanning across my face in a wave of fumes smelling like alcohol and, oddly enough, mint and garlic. "Like I said, you're more trouble than you're worth, but I consider myself pretty vindictive."

I can feel myself starting to hyperventilate. Maybe, and this is a hard maybe, not addressing the clear trauma and possible (probably) PTSD left from my fight with Sphynica is catching up to me. The handprint on my arm is burning like a brand and I'm shaking from head to toe as John raises a non-existent eyebrow.

"You losing it, kid?" he sneers, leather-like face stretching into a grin. "It's been a while, guess I still have my edge."

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I gasp out. I put my faith in the musculature of my shoulders, send a prayer, and jump.

It hurts, a whole fucking lot I’d say, but I get enough leverage to kick both of my feet right into John’s sternum. I turn his gravity with as much force as I can muster, and he goes careening up into the ceiling. Then with palms flat on the wall behind me, I flip it around so I’m facing whatever was on the other side.

I can see the rubble further down from where John originally smashed through the wall, but other than that, nothing of note. A headache flirts with my brain stem like the only rizz it possesses is the ‘hit you with a frying pan’ kind, which I’ll be honest I don’t love.

The hallway is empty for a sweet second before paintings are animating and carpets are lifting like snakes and all kinds of other wack shit. I grit my teeth and set my jaw, grab the handles of the swords, and brace myself.

The zombies come at me fast and in no discernible pattern. With my arms being… indisposed, I stick to just kicking anything that gets close enough and sending it hurtling away from me. Turn undead who? Wait, did I accidentally multiclass into Cleric?

A couple of humanoid zombies come running into the hall and fling themselves at me with reckless abandon, and I hook one around the head with my shins and make my connection. I grasp onto that connection between the head and the body and snap it, setting its head on spin and kicking it in the chest.

Sweet mercy let me tell you, the dead (heh) silence in the hallway after the zombie’s body drops to the floor and its head rolls down beside it is the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. I sweep my eyes across the group in a distinctly predatory fashion.

“Well, that changes things,” I murmur.

My hold on the handles of the swords makes it easy to focus on powers and twist them right off, as close to the entry points in my shoulders as possible. “Fuck, this is gonna hurt,” I hiss, taking a deep breath and relaxing my shoulders. Then I jerk myself forward off the wall.

Mary mother *Jesus*—

Ok so next time I'm just gonna leave them in and walk around with pierced shoulders. I could make it a fashion statement, I swear. Goddammit, my poor trench coat is soaked in blood. That is so sick and twisted.

I glance back at the sword stubs in the wall in contemplation before glance back at the handles still in my hands. I just kinda… line them back up and try… I don't even know. Turning them back together? I figure if I turned them apart by unconnecting the thread between them I can just sorta… tie them back together?

It works, so maybe I'm not an idiot. That didn't feel like it should have worked with the parameters of my abilities, but I'm not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth.

I yank the swords out of the wall and flick the blood off them. I turn back to the still plentiful army of zombies who have patiently waited with gobsmacked expressions on their faces. "So… y'all fancy another go?" I ask, brandishing John's swords like I'll have any idea how to use them.

At least two thirds of the zombies fully turn tail and flee. God, what a confidence boost. Nothing strokes the ego like making shit run away from you. Even the zombie I decapitated grabs his head from the floor and tries to run. 'Tries' being the operative word, because he runs the wrong direction and slams into a wall.

The moment is ruined by a hand bursting through the wall right beside my head and blindly smacking around and hitting me in the nose. "Ow! What the fuck?!" I yelp, then fully shout as I'm blasted into the opposite wall, the one I came from exploding in my face.

For once I manage to not hit my head off the wall, but that's pretty quickly rectified by stupid fucking *John* coming at me like the ghost of Christmas fucking Past and smashing his bottle over my head, then immediately following it up by throat punching me.

I drop the swords on reflex to grab at my neck, at this rate I'm either gonna have to invest in a gorget or just accept not having a voice anymore.

John snatches the swords out of the air with a deftness you wouldn't expect from a drunk pirate that isn't Jack Sparrow, and comes at me like he's trying to pin me to the wall like a fly again.

That's not cool with me, so I jerk my gravity upwards and fall out of the way.

"That's pretty bloody annoying, you know that?" he grumbles, switching the direction of his swing in a split second and just barely managing to nick my jacket.

"Dude! Stop ruining my trench coat, this thing was cunty as hell!" I complain, twisting to land on my feet when I reach the ceiling. "I'm already gonna have to mend the *stab holes,* and do you have any idea how hard getting bloodstains out of this fabric is gonna be?!"

"Take one look at my coat and complain again. You know I haven't gotten to mend this thing since I died? *Moria* wouldn't let me!" John snaps back, waving at his red and pink coat incredulously.

"Seriously?! What kind of boss is this guy?! Tell me you guys at least have dental?!" I gasp in mock outrage, spinning on my heel and running away from him, still on the ceiling.

"Hell no we don't! This guy sucks! He barely even works, you know. But we've alway got to be on the clock. It's ridiculous!" he complains, following from the ground. "Will you come down?!"

"No way in hell! You stabbed me!" I shriek back. "At this point if he sucks so much why don't you just purify yourself and peace out?"

"I *know* you did not just tell me to kill myself—" John starts before cutting himself off to dodge the bullet I fire down at him. "And now you're shooting me from the ceiling, what the

fuck is wrong with you?!"

"This from a guy employed in unworkable circumstances! For fucks sake, unionize!" I harp, firing a couple more times.

"You know he complained to me once about Kaido kicking his ass and got upset when I clowned on him for being bested by itty bitty beastie Kaido," he says conversationally, parrying the bullets with his shitty swords like it's nothing.

"Seriously? He thought complaining to *you* was a good idea?" I ask incredulously. "That's like, number one Do-Not when interacting with people who knew someone you hate. Don't try to commiserate if they're gonna be an asshole about it."

John waves his swords. "Exactly! Thank you!" he says triumphantly. "Can you come back down now? This is tedious and I want to kill you already."

"Dude no," I blurt. "Living is the bomb. Not my fault your ass got got."

"That is so mean and hurtful," John groans, sounding less hurt and more inconvenienced. "So you're not coming down?"

"No chance in hell," I say with a sardonic smile. In response he chucks his sword at me so fast it nearly severs my ear off. "WOAH DUDE WHAT THE FUCK NO!"

It rebounds off the ceiling and crashes back to the floor before I can catch it.

"C'mere you little shit!" John crows, slashing out with the other sword and sending one of those stupid ass flying slashes that shouldn't be physically possible at me.

"I thought we were bonding!" I shriek, taking off down the hall again. "Fuck off ye spooky betch!"

“Bonding shmonding! And what was that accent?!” he retorts, chasing after me.

I peek back to see what he’s doing and immediately trip over a chandelier I didn’t see and lose grip of my powers. I go crashing back down to the floor and through the power of what I’m gonna call god and anime, that is to say my shitty ass Observation Haki, narrowly roll out of the way of another flying slash.

“Can we have a timeout *please?!* My shoulders are so not loving this!” I yelp, planting a hand on the ground to swing myself up into a kick that impacts hard on one of John’s swords.

“Timeouts are for the weak. Are you weak?” he sneers with his stupid constantly grinning face.

“Considering my probable nerve damage and likely lingering brain damage? Uh — just maybe?!” I yell, spinning and trying to get another shot in. Considering he deflects it and it almost rebounds and kills me, I’m thinking that is not the play this time.

He drops one of the swords and my eyebrows fly into my hairline. In the second I’m distracted by the falling object, he snaps out with his hand and punches me across the face, slashing up my thigh with his offhand.

I shout in pain and rear back. “Dude fuck you!”

John just cackles and roundhouse kicks me. It takes more effort than I’d wish, but I manage to block the blow with my impact pistol. He blinks in confusion for a moment, probably wondering where all his force went, before I jerk up my hand and blast a slash into his chest.

He stumbles back and I take the second to cartwheel further away from him. “Was that a — how did you get a dial inside a gun?!” he shouts incredulously, pawing at his chest as it sluggishly bleeds brackish blood.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, weather boy?” I retort, putting more distance between us.

“Wh — I’M NOT A WEATHER BOY!” he shrieks, lunging forward.

From there it’s a series of blows exchanged and met — if not evenly, then well enough — that send both of us dancing down and through the halls in flashes of gunfire and sword swipes.

I very quickly start to feel my energy flag. It could be the gaping bloody holes in my shoulders, it could be the excessive use of my fruit, it could be the headache, who knows.

“Aw, don’t tell me you’re tired already,” John taunts, driving me further into the halls and up a staircase.

“Not on your not-life,” I jeer back, trying to shoot him in the dick. In my defence, while entirely classless, it is quite literally always effective.

John, the motherfucker he is, dodges. “Try that again and I kill you worse,” he threatens. I try it again, just because he said. “Knock it off!” he roars, pulling back for a second before whirling forward like a mini tornado of swords and absolutely blasting me through a wall.

“NOT AGAIN!” I scream, pushing myself out of rubble. I really don’t know how much more of that shit I can take before the brain damage is PERMANENT permanent. “Would it kill you insane bastards to come up with something original?!”

“I am original! I’m *the* original! Whoever else has been kickin’ yer ass through walls nicked the idea offa *me!”* John announces hautily, waltzing through the me-shaped hole in the wall. “If you don’t like it, why not just off yourself or make things easy on me?”

“Uh, no?” I squawk.

“See?” he says imploringly. “It’s fucked up and weird for you to tell someone they should kick it in the middle of a fight! Someone oughta teach you some damn manners.”

“I am so well mannered it would charm your fucking socks off,” I grind out as we re-engage into combat once more. “It’s really not my fault you caught me in a setting where they aren’t needed.”

John groans long and loud and produces another bottle of booze from seemingly nowhere. He takes a long draw, despite my best effort to shoot the bottle to smithereens just to be a dick, and sighs.

Then he throws the bottle at my face, surprising me so bad I don’t manage to block it before the damn thing smashes over my head. With the alcohol stinging my eyes and hopes that the glass in my hair won’t cause some kinda damage, I don’t see or block the kick he sends into my stomach either.

I soar, crash, and tumble through another wall and come to a stop when I crash into some kind of wooden fence. I use it as leverage to struggle to my feet and look around. I’m in some kind of area with circus tent-like constructions, and behind one I can make out the foggy skies that indicate an exit from this hell hole of a manor.

I hear John coming in for an attack before I see him. In fact, I feel it in the air first. The shitty half-cocked Observation Haki I’ve been sporting on and off shouts in the back of my head and as I feel the threat closing in, I close my fist around the last of my salt and spin on a dime, thrusting my fist out with as much force as I can.

My hand cracks against John’s teeth then finds a home in his mouth which is, objectively, disgusting. I drop the salt in and promptly withdraw.

“Oh,” John coughs, “fair enough. Quick question, you interested in my treasure?”

I scoff, wiping my hand down my trench coat. “Maybe, maybe not.”

He nods, body starting to twitch. “You can have it, if you can find it.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now fuck off to the ether.”

The shaking intensifies until he collapses in a pile of limp limbs like a puppet with its strings cut, a black mass of smoke or some shit bursting out of his mouth and shooting through the arena and out to the open skies.

I take a deep breath, then another, and curse long under my breath. Oh my shoulders are soooo gonna feel this tomorrow. “Fuuuuck,” I hiss, wincing.

Then my Haki screams to life again. I go ramrod straight and yank my gravity sideways, falling away just before a shape smashes to the ground right where I was. A knight in rusted armour wrenches its sword out of the stone work and turns to me in all its spear skewered glory.

I decide I super don’t want to deal with that shit and turn back to run the way I was tossed in, only to be met with a chunk of wall with a face stitched into it. We stare at each other for a second.

“Move,” I demand.

“N — no,” it responds, looking put out by my asking.

I don’t get to tell it off because I’m suddenly being accosted again by the knight. I dodge out of the way of its strike and slam a hand into its back, forcing some distance between us by sending it across the room.

“The way is shut. It was made by the Dead, and the Dead keep it, until the time comes,” I quote in a murmur, watching warily as more armoured and strange zombies come out of the

woodwork to stand before me. “The way is shut.”

Well fuck. Double fuck, triple fuck, fucking however many of these *fuckers* fuck. I remember this stupid ass sequence, it took Franky, Robin *and* Luffy to beat these guys back, and even then Luffy got got. I — uh, may be fucked.

Despite my comparison to Return of the King, I reeeally don’t think these guys are gonna be changing allegiance to help me, King of Gondor or not. Oh wait, we’re *literally* in the Mines of Moria. Oh, this arc is a Tolkien reference jackpot.

I’m gonna have to do something drastic.

I dip into a sweeping bow. “Well then gentlemen, let us all pick our gods and pray, because this may get ugly.”

Probably more so for me than them, but it always pays to pretend you’re intimidating.

Wait. Maybe I can..?

I plant my feet and take a deep breath, then point to the ceiling with an alarmed look. “HOLY SHIT WHAT IS THAT?!” I scream. When they look up I latch my powers onto the floor with everything I have and fucking turn it.

The floor spinning trick I used on John is nothing compared to the effort it takes to spin this one. Not only does it make my ears pop, it’s slow as hell. Maybe I can attribute our slow speed to why none of the general zombies catch on to what I’m doing until I’m finished.

“Yeah, ok. It’s been real,” I huff out, spinning on my heel and dashing out onto the bridge now that it’s right behind me. Maybe that’s the real advantage of my fruit, free easy escape card. My head is pounding something awful now, though.

“Hey! What the hell!” one of the zombies shouts.

I don’t bother looking behind me, I just shriek and book it harder to the door on the other side of the bridge. I nearly make it ⅔ of the way there, too.

That, of course, is when a giant hand attached to a long fuzzy striped limb reaches out of the door and plants itself on the bridge. I skid to a stop, apprehension slowing my feet. Another hand follows, then a stump like the arm and another and another and another…

Oh my god. Oh my god. OH MY GOD.

“NOPE!” I scream, running back for the zombie generals. “ABSOLUTELY NOT! I’LL TAKE MY CHANCES WITH THE GENERALS!”

The spider monkey cackles as it forces itself out of the door. “Hey! Heeeey! Monkey monkey monkey!”

“NOOOOOO!” I screech.

“Come baaack! Be realistic, ahead of you is me, and behind you are armoured warriors!” it calls.

“I’LL TAKE THE WARRIORS, STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!” I holler before having to stop short as the generals all close in on my only other exit. I falter, looking back and forth between my options. “I can’t believe I’m gonna die on fucking Thriller Bark to a hoard of guys who already died,” I whine dejectedly. This is such a lame way to go out.

“Heads up!” a familiar voice yells.

I jerk my head up and swing it around to find the source. “Franky?” I call out.

Then the bridge explodes.

Chapter End Notes

Learning I love writing fight scenes is perhaps the most surprising thing that's happened to me since I started writing this fic.

I'm so upset with myself. The ADHD has me by the throat and won't let go so now I'm writing a Harry Potter fic and it's taking all the inspiration I had for writing this T-T I'm so genuinely pissed. The good news is I'm finally getting screened for ADHD by my doctor and the hope is I get at the very least medicated (if not a diagnosis because they're SO FUCKING EXPENSIVE HOLY SHIT) and can get my distractable toddler of a brain back on track.

In other news It's been almost A YEAR since I started writing this fic and I'm nearly at chapter 100. So that's fucking insane.

Chapter 89: Chapter Eighty Nine: Freaky Creatures, Monster Party

Chapter Summary

Turn The Lights Off - Tally Hall

My first thought is *of course Franky would blow up the bridge with me on it,* my second is *OH FUCK OH FUCK I'M FALLING OH FUCK—*

Chapter Notes

Did I accidentally stay up until five last night because I started learning Latin on Duolingo? Yes. Am I good at it in the slightest? No. Do I still have a 12 day streak? Fuck yes I do. Did I start learning it because of that HP fic I'm writing? Shut up. Yes.

CATCH ME OUT HERE GETTING ACCEPTED TO EVERY PROGRAM I APPLIED TO. I AM THE GOAT. I AM INCREDIBLE. I AM MY OWN GOD. I AM BEYOND TALENT.

Anyway my burgeoning god complex aside I am now spoiled for choice on what program to pick and will stress about this for the next month xoxo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My first thought is *of course Franky would blow up the bridge with me on it.* My second is *OH FUCK OH FUCK I'M FALLING OH FUCK—*

The next is *AM I DEAD AND DID AN ANGEL JUST COME TO COLLECT MY ASS?*

The answer is no, it's just Robin with wings made of hands. Because that's… normal… "This only lasts five seconds." Robin says instead of a greeting. I yelp and grapple onto her as hard as I can.

“That is a very short amount of time!” Franky squawks, Robin hanging onto him with one hand and me with the other, trying to aim his hand at the edge of the broken bridge. His hand blasts out and attaches itself to the crumbling brick, a thick chain keeping it connected to his arm.

Robin’s biblically accurate angel look fades rapidly and suddenly we’re all swinging violently fast toward the wall of the mansion. I suddenly remember I can actually sort of fly and have no idea why I’m freaking out about this.

A couple quick twists of my gravity later, I’m standing side by side with Robin on the remains of the bridge. “Did you use his face like a springboard?” I ask disparagingly. She just shrugs.

“Dick move!” Franky shouts, reeling himself up to us.

“Sorry,” she says breezily, not very apologetic at all.

“YOU!” the spider monkey shrieks from the ground. “I’M A SPIDER! I’LL COME UP THERE AND GET YOU FOR THAT!”

I shiver and tuck in closer to Robin. “It just had to be a spider,” I whine. Then I blink. “Does anyone else hear that?” The noise gets steadily louder until we’re all looking up as a figure plummets from the sky right past us, screaming as he lands in the huddle of zombies like a comet. “That was Brook, wasn’t it.”

“Yeah,” Franky says slowly. “Yeah it was. Is the bone guy… ok?”

“He’s probably fine,” I say dubiously, staring at the Brook-shaped crater in the ground. Then I’m screaming because the spider monkey is *back on it’s fucking feet and shooting webs to climb up to us.*

It cackles like mad, spinning a web where the bridge once was from his hands. I don't know whether it's better or worse that this thing is so anatomically incorrect. "It doesn't matter that some weirdo butted in, I can still catch up with webs! Mooonkey monkeeey?"

"Sweet lord put me out of my misery," I mutter, shuffling behind Robin.

"Anyone seen a pillar around here?" Franky asks, pulling the pair of nunchaku he's had strapped to his back off. I jerk my thumb back at the room and he nods. "Buy me a couple minutes, yeah?"

Robin crosses her arms while her mouth ticks up.

"Yeah you can take this one Robin, this is a big fat *no* for me," I laugh nervously, shuffling even further back as the stupid fucking spider monkey lifts its hands to shoot webs at us.

"That's fine," Robin replies, then a bunch of hands are sprouting around the monkey's eye and slapping it. Harsh.

"YOU SLAPPED MY EYEBALL?!" the spider monkey screams hysterically, slamming its hands down over its eyes, then screaming a pitch higher as the webs it was shooting spray right into them. *Harsh.*

"Ok, thanks for the cover! Move out of the way!" Franky announces, marching out with two halves of a pillar attached to the nunchaku. "Sometimes the monster calls for a bigger weapon!" Then he's lunging out and absolutely bitchslapping the spider monkey. In the face. ***Harsh.***

He smacks him one, twice, three times, then I'm distracted by the sound of skittering behind us.

"OH MY GOD THERE'S A HUNDRED FUCKIN' LITTLE ONES!" I scream, jumping like a foot in the air and scrambling behind Robin again. "ROBIN SAVE ME SAVE ME

PLEASE!” I weep.

Robin starts sprouting hands and swatting the rat spiders (who in their right mind thought that was even remotely a good idea dear *GOD)* and I basically climb onto her back to start shooting them from over her shoulder.

“Please tell me you have salt,” I beg.

“Erm — about that…” she mumbles, grabbing one of the abominations and fully tossing it off the building. “We had an… altercation. Did you run out?”

“I had an… altercation too,” I say slowly. “Sometimes you get accosted by the dead corpse of Captain John and he kicks your ass a bit. Shit happens?” I’m suddenly yanked off Robin’s back and in a matter of seconds I’m restrained by a bunch of rat spider silk. “OH EW EW EW NO NOPE ROBIN HELP—”

“Augh — oh dear,” Robin gasps, and when I look up she’s restrained in much the same way. “Sorry, I got caught off guard.”

“WHY DO THEY HAVE HANDS?!” I sob. “THESE THINGS WOULD BE DENIED ENTRY INTO GOD’S KINGDOM!”

“Aw shit!” Franky yells, *also getting caught.* “Goddamnit!”

“Ahhhahaah! Idiots! Mooonkey monkeeey! Off guard my ass! There are upwards off 500 of my subordinate spider mice on Thriller Bark, quietly snatching your companions away when you least expect it! Do you have any idea how many of yours have been caught?!” the spider monkey screeches in glee.

“Wait — good point! Who the fuck did you catch?!” Franky demands. That single sentence makes me doubt a whole fucking lot of my plan. If Luffy’s happy ass got caught already we will be in deep deep shit.

The spider monkey howls in laughter. “I’ll never tell! These threads of ours are impossible to cut through by human means, you’re done for!”

Then the humming starts. The spider monkey freezes and I can’t help but laugh at the look on the fuckers face. “Oh you’re in for it now, shithead! Sound familiar, does it?!”

“Yohohoho, yohohoho. Yohohoho, yohohoho,” Brook’s voice floats up from below us like a ghost in the mist.

“What is that?! Who’s singing that song?!” the spider monkey yells, absolutely losing its shit.

“Seems you guys are in a bit of a sticky situation,” Brook chuckles, suddenly beside us.

“Sweet fuck, how did you get up here?” I yelp, wiggling around in the webs.

“I’m very light, I jumped,” he says pleasantly. “I don’t suppose you folks could use a hand, though I only have the bones for one, yohohoho!”

“Hey! Who are you?! You’re not a zombie?!” the spider monkey shouts.

“This is the worst episode of Scooby Doo ever!” I cry.

“Are you another one of their comrades?!” spider monkey demands.

“Would you accept my assistance?” Brook asks.

“YES PLEASE KILL THAT THING!” I beg.

“HEY! Listen to me! Who are you?!” the spider monkey demands one last time before Brook is unsheathing his sword and strolling up to it, then resheathing it with a resounding click. The spider monkey makes a choked out sound as he all but splits down the middle, that same brackish blood spraying up along the cut.

“Did you use salt?!” Franky yells.

“Wait… I recognize you..!” the spider monkey rasps.

“Yohohoho, not to worry,” Brook tuts. Then the same way John did, that black smokey shit rips out of its mouth and goes soaring off into the sky while it collapses in a heap of useless flesh.

“I — It’s really him!” one of the rat spiders screams.

“It’s the humming swordsman from five years ago!” another wails.

“We have to go tell master Moria!” another screeches before they’re all hightailing it out of there fast as their tiny legs can carry them.

I try to wiggle away with a cringe. “As fun as this is, someone *please* get me out of here.”

“Ah, yes. Fire will do the trick,” Brook reveals.

“Oh. Great,” Franky says, then starts breathing fire on the webs. God I wish I could do that.

Once we’re all back to our feet and web-free, the panic from what the spider monkey returns tenfold. “So, like, there’s no proof what that er — *thing* said is true, right? None of our idiots

would be idiotic enough to get caught, right?! We're smarter than that, *right?!"* I spit, waving my hands around.

"If they have been caught, it's likely too late," Brook says sagely.

I choke and Franky's jaw drops. "Too late, you say?!" he yells.

"P — please don't shout so much. My ears will start ringing!" Brook gasps. "Or they would if I had any! Yohohoho, skull joke!"

Robin puts a hand on Franky's arm as he lines up his hand cannon. "Stop it. He's already dead."

"Now please listen without fooling around," Brook continues.

I nearly join Franky as he raises his hand cannon back up. "Stop it. He's already dead," Robin repeats, grabbing the both of us.

"I'll spare you the specifics, but essentially once your shadow is stolen it can be placed inside a zombie. That is the power of the Warlord of the Sea, Moria, with his Shadow Shadow Fruit," Brook explains. "I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen such things with my own eyes. Or I could if I had any—"

"You can hit him now," Robin announces. Franky happily bonks him on the skull. Hard.

"Let's keep this brief, if they were gonna have any of our crewmates captive to take their shadows or already snatched their asses, would they be in there?" I ask, gesturing to the other side of the web bridge.

"If they have already been taken, they will be back on your ship," Brook corrects. "Do you need more salt? Have more salt," he adds, handing all of us more pouches of salt.

I throw my head back and groan. “We don’t have time for that! I knew I should have invested in baby Transponders for all of us,” I mutter, twisting my fingers together. *“Fuck,* ok. You guys did your part of the plan though, right?”

Robin and Franky both nod. “The invisible guy is toast. Cook bro kicked him off the side of the ship and he might be super dead,” Franky explains. “Last we heard Chopper, Usopp and Sanji were all on their way to their destination. We were on our way to ours before we found you.”

I frown. “What are the odds Luffy hasn’t made a big mess..?” I ask slowly, cringing at the looks on my crewmates faces. “Ok, assuming Luffy is AWOL and maybe or maybe not consorting with the bush people, and assuming Zoro isn’t dead or accidentally on Sabaody without us, your job is currently our biggest priority.”

“Would you like to join us then? Actually, where is Miss navigator? Wasn’t she supposed to stick with you?” Robin asks.

I groan again. “We got split up. She knows where she’s supposed to go so I hope she gets there. Brook, are you headed back up to get your shadow?”

Brook nods. “I can’t give up yet, no matter how outmatched I am. I do apologize for losing your swordsman. I did try my best to keep a close eye on him even though I haven’t any, yohohoho!”

I wave him off. “I once watched Zoro walk into a broom closet, then enter through the front door ten minutes later. I don’t fucking know how he does it, but you had no chance of keeping him in line. If we’re lucky he’ll be on his way to your shadow too, and if we’re not, I’ve got contingencies.”

“So you’ll be going with the skeleton?” Franky asks.

“Yeah. What time is it?” I ask back.

He flicks his wrist and a flap opens to a clockface. I didn't know he could do that? "Nearly one in the morning."

"Shit. Ok we're losing ground. You two get your task done, me and Brook will head up. If you find out anyone has gotten got, send up a flare then finish your job," I demand.

I get a round of nods from everyone involved. "Any further instructions or shifts, oh great plan master?" Franky asks.

I smirk. "If you do need to use the flare and you happen to see Nami, tell her to engage contingency three."

Franky barks out a startled laugh. "Skipping two, are you? You got it little bro, she'll get the message!"

I give Robin a quick side hug and hastily reload my guns. "Remember, dawn is a hard and unforgiving deadline."

"We know, little bro. But before we go, I got one more question for the skeleton guy," Franky pipes up. Brook and I both tilt our heads. "If you go out in public looking like that, you know how people are going to react, don't you? You're a walking talking skeleton, it's creepy as fuck and no one is gonna want to be friends with that."

"Franky," Robin admonishes.

"Even if you could get out of these cursed waters and see the sun, your life would still be full of suffering. You've had it rough for a real long time, are you sure you can handle that?" Franky asks. "You said you were so lonely you wanted to die. If I was you I would have given up a long time ago. But you still act like a gentleman and make jokes. What exactly made you stick around?"

“In most circles asking someone you’ve known for only a few hours what their reason for living is may be considered rude,” I mumble.

“...Yohohoho. You don’t care for timing, do you?” Brook chuckles weakly. “It’s a simple story, really. A long time ago my crew was forced to leave behind one of its members. We knew it was a difficult decision, but we promised to return. We set off in our ship and got annihilated on this sea…”

“Brook…” I murmur quietly.

“I lived for a very long time on that ship to fulfil that obligation, to uphold that promise! It’s been… 50 years, I suppose, since we died,” he finishes diminutively.

“50 years?!” Franky squawks. “It’s that old of a story?! I wasn’t even born yet! There’s no way that guy waited around that long.”

“You don’t know that!” Brook snaps, the first remotely impolite thing he’s done since we met him. “He’d be well within his rights to leave, I’d understand… But if by some chance he’s stuck around and believed in our promise for all these years, how lonely must he be?! He must think we betrayed him, but if he’s still waiting even now the strength of his feelings must be immeasurable!”

“You…” Franky mutters.

“The name of that friend we swore to meet again at the cape is Laboon,” the way Brook’s voice curls around the name with such fondness it makes my cheek tingle with a smile. “We certainly couldn't take a young whale on a dangerous journey like ours.”

“A whale..?!” Franky asks incredulously.

“Yes,” Brook whispers. “I can only imagine how big he must have gotten by now.”

“You think that whale understood your promise?” Franky inquires.

“I can’t help but feel he has believed in us all the time, and waited for us to come back and play him more music. I don’t think he will forgive us for such irresponsible deaths. But no matter how much he resents me for forcing him to suffer all these years…” Brook’s teeth grind harshly together. “Death is never an apology! Because when a man makes a promise he doesn’t stop fighting until he fulfills it!”

Franky and Robin blink wide eyes at him. “Ah. I see,” Franky says near silently.

Brook straightens up. “My apologies for the outburst.”

“Hey Brook?” I murmur. He hums. “When this is all over, why don’t you ask Luffy about our first adventure in the Grand Line? We have a pension for bets and promises he might like to tell you about.”

He regards me with empty eye sockets for a moment before nodding. “And so I shall.”

I give him a nod back and clap. “Now that there’s some emotional weight behind it, let’s rock and roll!”

Franky and Robin turn and start heading across the bridge away from us, and Brook offers his arm to me as we head back from whence I came. “You really needn’t come with me, I’m sure you could find your friends if you looked hard enough,” he says.

“You’re my friend too, so I’ll stick with you,” I respond simply.

Brook barely pauses, but he does falter. “Ah. I see. Very well,” he says haltingly.

“I meant what I said back on our ship. No refunds, I think you’re cool, you have no choice, blah blah blah. We’re besties for resties now, which means we’re ride or die. Well, ride or die again, in your case,” I joke.

He hums lowly. “I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable with this question, so please feel free to disregard it but… have you perhaps… died before?”

I stop in my tracks, jerking him to a halt as well with my grip on his arm. “You… you can tell that?” I ask weakly.

He places a skeletal hand over my own. “I know death more intimately than most. It is not something that leaves a person easily, even now the shroud of it hangs over the heads of those like you and I. I won’t ever pressure you to speak of your experience, and I hope me speaking of my own never makes you feel as though you need to as well, but there is a comfort in knowing you aren’t a singularity.”

I take a deep breath. “The human experience can be very lonely. We are all completely unique and no one will ever be able to know you down to your soul because there’s things you won’t, can’t, or don’t tell them. But still. We persevere, you *persist* through loneliness. You survive so one day you’ll meet people you can share experiences with,” I stare right up into the empty holes of Brook’s eye sockets and clutch his bony fingers. “We are going to walk up these stairs together and we’re both going to be connected forever by a human experience. It’s the most beautiful part of being *alive.”*

Brook stares at me for a long moment, both of us standing at the first steps of a staircase. “It is a *privilege* to share this human experience with you, Detective Domino,” he states with all the gravity and weight it deserves.

I beam at him. “I don’t mind so much being a singularity if I get to do it with you around,” I say sincerely. “And it would be my privilege if you would call me Ed.”

Brook sniffs. “I’m honoured, Ed. Let us embark on a journey of connection then, shall we?”

_____

“—and then Luffy tried to combo move me and by that I mean he *swung me like a damn battering ram,* and I’m just screaming my head off the whole time because we’re gonna die and this habitual smoker is gonna be the one to do it,” I say, gesticulating wildly. “Anyway. That’s the story of how we got saved from the Marines by a hurricane that may or may not have been caused by Luffy’s dad.”

Brook stares at me for a long few seconds. “Your life sounds so interesting,” he says slowly. “How exactly did he cause a hurricane?”

“No idea,” I say cheerfully. “Could be a Devil Fruit, he could just be like that. Maybe we’ll never know.”

“Fascinating. The people of the world are fascinating, yohohoho!” he laughs, which quickly turns into a scream. “DID YOU SEE THAT?!”

I swing my head around wildly. “Hah? See what?!”

“G — G — G — GHOST!” he yelps, pointing one shaky skeletal finger ahead.

I squint up the hallway and see a negative hollow peeking around the corner. “Oh. Yeah, ghost.” I peer up at him through my fringe. “You do know you’re basically a skeleton being driven by a ghost, right?”

His jaw opens with a click and stays there. “Why… why would you say that?” he asks in mounting horror. “I’m going to be stuck thinking that for the rest of my life. That’s going to stay in my brain forever. Or it would if I had one, yohohoho!”

“Wait do you not have a brain—”

“Horo-horo-horo! You two are hilarious!” a high voice laughs.

Me and Brook both pause. “Er — thank you?” I call to the disembodied air. Is that..?

“It’s a shame you’re not cute,” the voice continues as a figure steps out of the wall.

“Oh my god,” I blurt. “You’re so fucking pretty.”

Perona blinks wide round eyes at me. “Heh?”

“That outfit is cunty as hell, oh my god,” I continue, because at this point if I’ve already put my foot in it I’m gonna fucking commit. “Your whole vibe is so adorable.”

Perona’s face goes pink. “O — oh. Uh, thank you,” she mumbles. “I guess from certain angles you might be kinda cute?”

I wave my hand. “I’ve spent all night fighting zombies and I look like dogshit, I promise I’m usually prettier than this. Thank you, though.”

“Oh this is lovely,” Brook sighs. “Just wondering, would you be willing to—”

I kick Brook hard in the shin. “LET US GO,” I talk over him. Loudly.

“Ow. Yeah, that’s what I was going to ask,” Brook wheezes, hopping around clutching his shin.

Perona’s mouth turns down. “Hm. I dunno, it’s kinda my job to stop you guys,” she mutters.

“I’ve heard terrible things about the employment on this ship,” I say solemnly. “Not even dental.”

“No dental?” Brook repeats, sounding offended at the mere concept.

Perona frowns harder. “There’s only like four living people on the ship. Why would we need dental?”

Me and Brook both gasp, clutching metaphorical pearls in outrage. “Taking care of your teeth doesn’t stop at the grave, I’ll have you know,” I state, then turn to Brook. “You know, you won’t be the first skeleton we’ve had on our ship. One fell on us a while ago, had tar on its teeth to preserve them.” I turn back to Perona. “Just saying, maybe you should rethink the employment contract, some benefits could really improve work conditions and morale of your employees.”

“You’re very ridiculous,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Should I get tar for my teeth?” Brook asks.

“I think you’re a special case, as long as you brush every morning and night,” I advise. “I don’t trust a dentist as far as I could throw one, but sometimes their advice is fair.”

“You don’t trust dentists?” Perona and Brook echo at the same time.

I shrug. “There’s something weird about someone who makes a career of sticking fingers in peoples mouths. Plus they make my gums bleed and get mad when I bite them. Like? Don’t do stupid shit if you don’t wanna get bit?”

“Fair,” Brook and Perona nod.

Perona blinks and shakes her head. “What am I doing? That’s enough of you two, time to go.” She swings an arm forward and two hollows zoom down the hall toward us.

“Oh man not again—” I groan, shivering as the hollow flies through me. It’s as cold and depressing as the first time and I full body shake with a noise of disgust before it washes away. “Ew ew ew, no thank you.”

The second hollow dives through Brook’s stomach and he stands stoic for a second before dropping to his knees and putting his head to the floor. Instead of saying something terribly depressing and hilarious, he just fucking screams.

I jump back a step with a yelp. Brook stops. There’s a moment of silence.

“...Brook? Buddy, you alright?” I ask hesitantly.

Brook hops back up to his feet with a laugh. “Yohohoho! What a strange and awful feeling! That would turn my stomach, if I had one! Yohohoho!”

“What the hell is wrong with you people?!” Perona shrieks. “Neither of those were normal reactions!”

Me and Brook look at each other. “We’re not exactly normal people..?” I hedge.

“Very much so,” Brook confirms.

Perona screams and flees.

Me and Brook look at each other again.

“So, to your shadow?” I prompt, offering my arm this time.

Brook takes it. “To my shadow.”

We continue our stroll.

Chapter End Notes

Ian Sinclair is one of my favourite voice actors and his work on Brook's dub voice is just so — words cannot describe. It's phenomenal.

Ed instinctually hitting on any woman with some kind of connection with Zoro is a beloved little gag of mine. You go you funky little homosexual.

Look the Ed & Brook duo is unmatched. Get on their level or GET OUT.

Btw contingency one was Everyone Run For Your Lives, and contingency two was Full Rendezvous. There are seven contingencies.

Chapter 90: Chapter Ninety: Soon Arrived The Twilight

Chapter Summary

Murders - Tally Hall

On the top floor of Hogback's research facility waits a not-quite man. A humming zombie wrapped in bandages and a tattered kimono, with tea in one hand and the sword Shusui in the other. He sits calmly in a chair seemingly awaiting our arrival.

Chapter Notes

DAY TWO ON VYVANSE THIS SHIT BETTER START WORKING SOON AND WORKING *HARD* OR I'M DIVING ACROSS THE PHARMACY COUNTERTOP AND ATTACKING THE LADY WHO WORKS THERE. (Not really she's lovely, she printed me a booklet of symptoms for the medication and called me hun and I nearly cried.) So yeah being medicated is going swell. I spent two hours reading my grammar textbook. *Recreationally.*

I apologize for the sheer amount of Tally Hall in this arc. Their vibe just feels right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the top floor of Hogback's research facility waits a not-quite man. A humming zombie wrapped in bandages and a tattered kimono, with tea in one hand and the sword Shusui in the other. He sits calmly in a chair seemingly awaiting our arrival.

The door to the research room has been cleaved in half already, the bottom portion on the floor and the gap tall enough I don't even need to duck to enter the room.

"Yohohoho. I knew it," the zombie chuckles. "You wouldn't give up after being knocked down once. And you brought a friend."

"Of course not," Brook says harshly. "Until I get back what I lost, I'll keep fighting."

The zombie slams his scabbard into the floor. “Do you not know my name? Men cower in fear at the mere mention of the swordmaster Ryuma.”

“Quiet! You are my shadow!” Brook snaps.

“Yohohoho. Yet my body is much stronger,” Ryuma chuckles.

“I’ll return you to where you belong, beneath my feet!” Brook hisses.

Jesus Christ this banter goes hard as fuck.

“Your friend at least knows who I am, right?” Ryuma hums.

Both undead weirdos turn to me and I cringe. “Er — yeah? Yeah I’ve heard of you. The last swordsman to slay a dragon, right? You’re from Wano?” I say slowly.

“So my reputation precedes me even now. I wonder, will you find shame in begging for your afro once again in front of an audience who knows of my might?” Ryuma sneers.

“Wrong! This time is different!” Brook proclaims.

“I’ve never seen such a pitiful scene as last time,” Ryuma continues.

“Say what you will,” Brook snaps, drawing his sword from his cane and handing me the scabbard. “Apologies, friend. I must ask you hold this and keep out of the way!”

I give him a short salute with the scabbard and scuttle off to the side so I don’t capital D Die. “You got this, Brook!” I cheer.

“Will a cheerleader be enough? No more pathetic displays,” Ryuma drawls.

The two swordsmen burst into a flurry of action. Sparks fly and clangs ring and they both go nearly too fast for me to keep track of. I back further up into the wall.

“For these past five years I have waited for this second chance! I’ve become stronger!” Brook grunts.

There’s a deafening boom that echoes out through the mansion, and Ryuma and Brook barely pause for a second in their rematch.

“Oh what the fuck?” I mutter, clutching Brook’s scabbard closer.

“Ed, my friend, would mind terribly checking that out?” Brook calls between slashes and jabs, slicing the desk in half with a blow that Ryuma side steps.

“You got it buddy!” I yelp, taking the out to put some distance between myself and this fight. I shove his scabbard through my belt and duck out the door we entered through to stick my head out one of the open slats they have for windows.

A quick sweep of the grounds doesn’t reveal anything. This could have one of two outcomes, either Robin and Franky are being even more… *explosive* in their task than originally planned, or we’re absolutely fucked and that was Oars waking up because Luffy got his shadow snatched.

…So I’m praying for the former, for obvious reasons.

There’s no sign of a flare firing or been fired, so that’s… probably good news? This is actually a pretty good vantage point, I can see the bridge we were on and what I think is Perona’s Wonder Garden from here.

I flick open my spyglass and follow the edge of the island until I find where the Sunny is docked. There doesn't seem to be any movement on deck, and things look pretty much how I expected. The deck is just a little bit covered in flour with the occasional scorch mark I'm sure Franky will bitch about later.

Wait. I follow the path from the front gate up into the woods and into the graveyard. "Are you kidding me?" I mutter under my breath.

Zoro, Sanji and Nami are charging up towards the mansion like hell is on their heels. Well, Zoro is getting dragged by the other two, but my point stands.

"Did those idiots get their shadows stolen?" I hiss, snapping my spyglass back shut. At least I know backup is kind of on the way?

A yell echoes from the room I left Ryuma and Brook in. Because of the nature of Ryuma having Brook's shadow, I can't tell who made the noise, but it makes my stomach drop all the same. I push away from the window and freeze in the door frame.

Ryuma swings Shusui down hard on Brook's skull, widening the hairline fracture into a chasm and knocking one of his teeth right out of his face. I choke on a gasp and before I can even process it, my guns are drawn and Ryuma is defecting my shots to the side.

Brook takes the second of reprieve to retreat back to where I'm standing. "Sorry, I don't mean to interfere," I apologize.

"No matter," Brook huffs, nonexistent lungs heaving. "In the endeavour to resecure my shadow, I am unwilling to refuse aid."

"And my feelings on the matter?" Ryuma drawls.

“Stuff it,” I snap. “Brook, I can’t help you beat this guy. I’m no swordsman and I’m barely a decent fighter. But we can buy time for the class act to arrive, right?”

Brook tilts his head in understanding. “So your swordsman is..?”

I nod. “He is. If we’re lucky, it will only be a few minutes. You ready?”

He nods. “I’m ready.”

An ear splitting roar, discordant and echoey in a dual toned screech, breaks through the air and rattles the tower.

We all freeze.

“Oh. Fuck,” I whisper. Robin and Franky failed.

Oars is awake.

The revelation and ensuing panic is short lived — Ryuma seems to barely give a fuck and comes at the pair of us like an unleashed tiger with barely a second of wasted time.

I duck low to avoid a swing and Brook jabs over my head, nearly taking it off when Ryuma parries. I roll to the side and try a handful of shots at the same time Brook goes back in for a flurry of strikes, at least a couple of them getting through his deference to no avail.

“Stupid fucking zombies,” I mutter, kicking my foot out and swinging the floor around to kick Ryuma’s legs out.

He somehow manages to catch my ankle between the teeth of his geta sandals and stomps down to keep it pinned, then nearly hacks my arm off before Brook catches his sword on the flat of his own and redirects it into the stone.

I yank Brook's scabbard out of my belt and swing it toward his leg before he catches it. Brook takes the opportunity to try and lob his head off, but Ryuma twists Shusui around the scabbard and flicks it up, deflecting Brook's strike and sending his scabbard across the room.

Brook launches into an impressive set of maneuvers that I can't follow at all but look very cool, managing a glancing cut off his leg that forces him to release my ankle. Ryuma counters with a strike Brook catches between the ribs with a yelp, but uses to flip their positions around.

I have a thought, and twist myself around to grab Ryuma's leg before nearly getting my whole hand cut off for the effort.

So nix that plan, moving on.

I fire an impact shot from my pistol without even bothering to aim it, just turning the bullet so it blasts a hole through his side.

Ryuma skids back a couple feet, glancing down at the wound. "Yohohoho. Good shot."

I feel a second of pride before it's replaced by pain as Ryuma flashes forward and kicks me across the face, which with those sandals fucking *hurts,* and I go crashing back into the wall.

"Ed!" Brook cries out.

"Don't get distracted!" I wheeze back.

Brook gets distracted and Ryuma sends him flying right at me. I yelp and flatten myself on the floor, not the right move, and get a mouthful of Brook's banger afro as he smacks into me. It doesn't hurt nearly as much as I thought it would, though.

"You're lucky you're so light," I hack out, craning my neck so I don't inhale his hair. Wait, that gives me an idea. I stick my face back in the afro and furiously whisper my plan.

"You can — Oh, that clears a few things up, yohohoho! You had me quite confused!" he giggles.

I laugh. "I'm a two trick pony, trust me you'll get less impressed as time goes on."

"If you two are done chatting, we should return to fighting," Ryuma announces.

Then my Haki is screaming to life and I shove Brook hard while rolling the opposite direction as a slash carves through the stone ground and digs a gouge out of the wall behind us.

"Dick move!" I harp. "Have some motherfucking patience!"

"Yohohoho, you're so mouthy," Ryuma tuts.

I shoot a column of fire at him. While he's distracted with that, I lunge over to Brook and grab his hand, flinging him at the ceiling with a turn of gravity. He yelps as he goes and I quick switch my focus back to Ryuma as he *cuts through the fire and tries to kill me.*

I barely dodge with a scream that would shatter glass if there was any left in the room and accidentally send myself ass over teakettle into one of the coffins just sorta chilling to the side of the room. This has the fun little side effect of putting me face to face with a corpse when the damn thing bangs open.

I scream again, obviously, and on instinct turn my gravity to send myself away. Right back towards Ryuma, who would blink in semi surprise if he had actual eyes. Then the absolute asshole just holds his sword up to skewer my ass as I careen toward him.

That, by some blessing of a miracle, is when Brook comes flashing down from the ceiling in a falling jab that catches Ryuma off guard enough that when I reach him, I actually get a grasp of his arm.

Brook takes a hit that sends him sliding towards the coffin I slammed into. I skid across the floor on my knees, gravity restored and feeling just a little lightheaded from using my power in simultaneous places which I honestly didn't know I could do, and take a single breath.

I glance over my shoulder with a smirk and wave Ryuma's arm at him. "Need a hand?"

Twisting that fuckers arm off was a stroke of genuine genius. I am so fucking smart.

There's a second of silence before both of them start laughing in sync. Matching "yohohoho!"s echo through the room and Ryuma goes to clap before he realizes he doesn't have another hand to do it with and starts laughing harder.

"Yohohoho! Well done, you two make an ok team! How long have you been working on that maneuver?" he asks between chuckles.

"We literally met today, we're just that good," I sing-song, twirling around his arm before I realize I'm *twirling his arm* and chuck it away with a shriek.

"It really was a good effort," he murmurs. "But I'm afraid I'd like to wrap this up now. The team approach was cute, but I'd like to get back to destroying you."

"That doesn't bode well—"

My quip is cut off quite soundly as I find myself blinking at empty space, Ryuma gone from my view. I hear the tap-tap-tap of his geta sandals on the floor behind me, walking away, and it takes a moment to register what happened.

The air abruptly leaves me and I crash onto my knees, then my back, as agony explodes across my chest and steals my scream before it can even break from my throat.

I can't hear anything beyond fuzzy static for a moment before sense starts to return to me. I can hear the clash of metal and angry words returned with cocky ones as I blink dazedly up at the ceiling.

I heave in breath with a difficulty I hadn't expected. My shaking hands roam up my chest and torso, feeling for blood and coming away dry but sending sparkling fireworks of pain through my skin. I roll my head to the side and can see Ryuma and Brook back to back before Ryuma sheathes Shusui and Brook collapses to the ground.

I try to wheeze Brook's name but it just comes out like a high whistle noise. I try to roll onto my side to no avail as I watch Ryuma drag Brook up by the hair and hold his sword like he's going to sever it off.

This went downhill very quickly and I should not be nearly as surprised as I feel.

Brook's mane of hair is saved by the building suddenly shaking like an earthquake, sending me rolling across the floor in a whole fuckton of pain, then even more when Brook once again lands on top of me.

"A — are you alright?" Brook wheezes.

"Just fuckin' peachy," I groan.

"Yohohoho! That's enough, time for this to finish!" Ryuma announces. I can barely see through Brook's hair but I sure as fuck see his sword as it's about to skewer us.

I also see Zoro jump in the way like an avenging angel and save us.

“Not so fast,” he interjects.

“HALLELUJAH!” I holler, hugging Brook tight. “Roronoa Zoro you’re my hero!”

“And don’t you forget it,” Zoro huffs. “So it’s you, then. The legendary ancient samurai who killed a dragon,” he says, turning his block into a strike that puts a fair bit of distance between Ryuma and us. “I’m not sure I believe in dragons, but I did want to meet you!”

“Ed!” Nami cries, skidding into the room on her knees and hauls me back further to the door. “What happened to you?! I was so worried when I heard the voice in the hallway but I followed the plan to a T — Sanji get in here and help me!”

Sanji is in the room on her heels. “My dear! Did that shriveled up asparagus do this to you?! Do I have to kill him?!”

“Please calm down,” I groan. “I’m fine, Brook is semi fine, get us out of here so those sword wielding maniacs don’t kill us!”

“Can your friend truly beat him?” Brook asks shakily.

“He can sure as shit try,” I say brightly.

If Brook’s eyes could water and his lip tremble, they would be. “Then please… Please take my shadow back—”

“Shut the hell up!” Zoro shouts.

“HAAH?!” Brook yelps before fully fainting.

“Zoro! Don’t be rude!” I bark.

“That’s a pretty nice looking sword,” Zoro comments, completely ignoring me.

“Yohohoho, you have a good eye,” Ryuma chuckles. “This is one of the 21 great swords, Shusui. It’s a sword not many eyes have seen.”

“So it’s a great sword! I’ve come across a good thing. Since you’re called a samurai I expected a good blade,” Zoro laughs. “Universe shmuniverse, I’m gonna take that sword!”

“WHAT?!” Nami, Brook and Sanji all screech.

“What the hell is a shmuniverse?!” Nami squawks.

“Say what you will, you shit, I *told* your ass the universe would give you a sword!” I call as Sanji sweeps me up in a princess carry and Nami drags Brook into the hall. “You’re lucky there was no bet, FEEL GRATEFUL!”

“Can that stupid green broom take that guy? Better question, why are you covered in blood?” Sanji asks worriedly.

“He can at the very least fight him to a standstill. And I’m fine, I took out Captain motherfucking John himself, I deserve something nice. How many people do you know that can say they’ve beaten a Rocks Pirate?” I ramble.

“Yes darling, you're very impressive. Here I got you some granola, no nuts, how you like it,” he comforts, handing me a little to-go cup.

I blink up at him with watery eyes. “If I wasn’t married—”

“ANYWAY,” Nami interrupts before Sanji can start spewing blood like it’s going out of style, “needless to say I am quite worried about all the shaking.”

“Oh, do we know what’s up with that?” I ask, pouring the granola into my mouth like it’s a drink. Both Sanji and Nami grimace. “What did you do.”

Nami whistles for a second. “So I followed the plan,” she says slowly. “I was up in the garden bridge thing and having a kiki with this lovely girl, Lola, when Franky and Robin showed up to tell me to engage contingency three. I also ran into Usopp and Chopper while I was on the bridge, Chopper apparently beat the ever loving shit out of Hogback and they were on their way to the ghost girl.”

I nod slowly. “Uh huh. So you went back to the ship?”

“Yup. Harassed Sanji and Zoro’s unconscious bodies until they woke up,” she confirms, then makes a face. “But… er, on the way back…”

“On a scale of one to ten how bad is this going to make me want to put my head through a wall?” I ask trepidatiously.

“A solid nine or ten,” she says with a nervous laugh. “Sanji, why don’t you..?”

“Er — of course,” he says awkwardly. “So we made our way back here, but on our way up the stairs… Um. We ran into a bit of an… issue? A big issue.”

“A big issue with two very familiar voices,” Nami cuts in.

“No,” I say with mounting horror. “No fucking way.”

“Yeah. Apparently Moria — or Hogback, who knows — though it would be a great idea to stick our two resident *idiots—”* Nami shoots a sheepish Sanji a venemous look, “into a giant fuck off monster together.”

“Oh my god are you saying both *Sanji and Zoro* ***are stuck in the same fucking TWELVE STORY TALL GIANT?!”*** I scream at the top of my lungs.

THIS IS SO MUCH WORSE THAN MY WORST CASE SCENARIO.

“Yeah. It’s, uh… not ideal,” Nami says faintly

“WE’RE DOOMED! WE’RE ALL GONNA DIE!” I wail.

“We’re not that bad!” Sanji whines. At both Nami and I’s silent and manic stares his face crumples. “Yeah ok it is that bad.”

“How the literal actual fuck did he even shove the both of them in the same body?” I groan.

“I didn’t know they could do that,” Brook mumbles.

Sanji and Nami exchange a look. “It — er. It’s a little bit. A little bit… crazy?” Sanji hedges.

“It’s completely deranged and was in a yelling match with itself outside when we were on our way,” Nami corrects.

“I think it’s time for contingency eight,” I say faintly.

“Eight? I thought there were only seven,” Sanji asks confusedly.

“Contingency eight is where we burn down the island with Moria still on it and flee for our lives,” I correct.

“Oh. Yeah, I like this idea., Nami nods aggressively.

“Who knows, maybe Zoro and I’s shadows will tear each other to pieces before we have to deal with it,” Sanji says miserably.

I facepalm. “Maybe there’s hope yet,” I say sarcastically. “Have they started fighting in there? It seems awfully quiet.”

“We’re waiting for you to finish. Your screaming is fucking distracting,” Zoro calls through the open gap of a door.

I peek my head in and both Ryuma and Zoro are just stood watching the door with blank expressions. I offer them a sheepish smile and a thumbs up. “Sorry. You got this in the bag Zoro! Kick his ass!”

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever you say.”

“Yohohoho. Back to the matter at hand, you think you can take my black blade Shusui?” Ryuma chuckles.

“More like I’ll be picking it up from the ground beside your inanimate body, but yeah,” Zoro replies conversationally.

“I would discourage provoking him,” Brook stage whispers.

“Yohohoho! You’re all so feisty tonight,” he chuckles. “May I inquire as to why you carry three blades?”

“One of ‘em’s broken, I’m looking for a resting place for her. I usually use all three,” Zoro shrugs.

“Three swords? Never heard of it. Is it some kind of circus act? Yohohoho,” Ryuma laughs.

Zoro snorts. “It’s just a shame you won’t get to see it for yourself. I’m going to be breaking what’s left of your nose, that’s all you really have to know.”

Why is all the shit talk in this arc so good?

“Shame indeed. You seem fairly strong. A feeling I’ve long forgotten, excitement and anticipation like I’m facing an arrogant beast. I can hardly contain myself!” Ryuma hisses.

Between one blink and the next, they’re clashing. It’s nothing like watching him fight Brook or fighting him myself at all. The air pressure itself changes and my jaw drops at the sheer power behind their strikes.

“I nearly shit myself just now!” Brook yelps.

“TMI!” Nami and Sanji snap.

Zoro and Ryuma break apart to clash again, then Ryuma is thrusting out a jab that shoots a strike like a bullet, shattering the stone wall above us. We all scream at the top of our lungs as dust rains down above us.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” Sanji screeches.

“DOES HE HAVE A GUN?!” Nami yelps.

“How strong must he be, for a thrust to do *that?!* It doesn’t do that when I do it!” Brook awes.

“How the actual fuck did they warp the floor?!” I yell incredulously.

Nothing scares me quite as much as swordsmen. They’re a fucked up league all their own.

“Yohohoho, how good of you to deflect it,” Ryuma chuckles. The wall behind him explodes in a slash. “But that was rather close.”

“Stupid mosshead, showing off like that,” Sanji mutters, leaning over my shoulder.

“How the fuck is he doing this well with only one arm?” I continue, motioning vaguely at Ryuma’s severed arm on the other side of the room. “Better question, how the fuck did we manage that when he’s *this* good?!”

“He was never fighting us seriously,” Brook says faintly. “He *laughed* when you took his arm off, I don’t think he even sees it as a handicap.”

“Oh. Well. That’s good for my ego. Wonderful,” I hiss.

Zoro and Ryuma reunite in a clash that sends whatever remaining dust was in the room flying directly into my mouth. I fall back, hacking my lungs up, to the sweet dulcet sounds of clattering metal and grunts.

There’s a lot of ominous cracking sounds as Sanji pats me on the back and when I get eyes back on the fight, Zoro and Ryuma do that thing swordsmen do when they just sheath their

swords back to back. Then the fucking walls explode.

"I HATE SWORDSMEN! I HATE THEM ALL!" I holler, ducking my head into Sanji's chest as parts of the ceiling start to collapse.

"You and me both!" Sanji grunts, sweeping me back up into his arms. "Nami my dear, please grab Brook, we need to get out of here!"

Nami grabs him by a bony wrist and hauls him up over her shoulder with no trouble. "You are *so* fucking lucky you're light!"

"Thank you very much, being this close to a beautiful woman would make my heart stop if I had one, yohohoho!" Brook laughs.

"Stand back! As soon as the way is clear, run for it!" Sanji announces, spinning on one heel to the other, then roundhouse kicking the wall down.

"I'd like it on record I could have made that easier!" I yelp as he jumps out onto the corner of the roof with Nami on his heels.

"Couldn't have said that sooner?" Nami coughs, waving a hand in front of her face.

"Oh my god they're fighting on top of the roof," I balk.

There's a loud crash at their swords meet at the very tippy top of the roof. Zoro jumps back and skids down on our side, Ryuma disappearing over the other.

"He's gonna fall, that idiot!" Sanji grits out.

Zoro sprints around the side of the roof, shingles tearing out of the roof under his feet, but it seems Ryuma had the same idea and they clash again. The blowback sends both of them skittering across the tiles.

We watch their back and forth as more of the roof is slowly destroyed and both of them start to wear themselves out. They come to a momentary standstill with Zoro back on our side of the building, chest heaving and hand tight over Wado as he sheathes Kitetsu.

Then a slice smashes through the entire top of the roof. We all scream as the top half of it shoots forward, Zoro stabbing his sword into it to keep from falling and dying as it's basically pushed off the top of the building.

"Holy *shit,"* I choke out. "How the actual fuck are me and Brook still alive?!"

Zoro springs into the air and launches this crazy ass attack that looks like a giant *flaming dragon* at Ryuma. He leaps to counter it, but Zoro manages to get the devastating strike on him as the top of the roof topples off the building.

Ryuma, on fire, lands on the now flat top of the roof.

Zoro falls and collapses onto one of the dormers on his back.

"Wow," Sanji breathes.

"Jesus Christ," I swear.

"This sword, once carried by a legendary samurai…" Ryuma proclaims, panting hard and still on fire, "Shusui! With you as its master, this sword too should be satisfied."

"It's over," Brook says in awe. "He really never even tried against me."

“This was a great match,” Ryuma admits, dropping Shusui down to Zoro. “I have allowed this samurai’s body to suffer defeat… I am ashamed!”

Zoro catches the sword and sits forward heavily. “As long as you’re ashamed, that’s enough,” he huffs. “You’re a swordsman in body and mind. I would have liked to meet you when you were alive.”

Brook’s shadow shoots from Ryuma’s flaming body back to its rightful owner. Brook gasps in shock, shoulders shuddering like it’s a feeling he’s forgotten. He likely has. “It’s — It’s back! My shadow is back!” he cheers, jumping about in joy.

“I’ll take your sword. But let’s pretend this match never happened,” Zoro scoffs, but even from here I can see him smiling.

The high of a win is quickly destroyed by Oars bursting out of the mast mansion behind us.

“HOLY SHIT!” we all scream together.

“OH MY GOD IT’S THE SANJI AND ZORO AMALGAMATION!” Nami screeches.

“WE’RE GONNA DIE!” I wail. “WE’RE GONNA BE MURDERED BY A 200 FOOT TALL BALL OF REPRESSED HOMOEROTIC RAGE!”

Chapter End Notes

Teehee. Didn't see that one coming, did you? Pray for the Strawhats, they'll need it.

Ed is taking their shoulder injuries like a fucking CHAMP this time tho, they've come a long way since Arlong Park.

Also lmao guys I wrote a Marauders fic the mental illness really got to me. Go check that out if you wanna. It's got James Potter and Sirius Black dressed as a hotdog and a hamburger, c'mon you know you wanna.

Chapter 91: Chapter Ninety One: I'd Outpace The Dawn

Chapter Summary

De Selby (Part 2) - Hozier

"I've got Nami!" I yelp, grabbing her around the waist and jumping off the roof while she screams. Great timing too, since Oars absolutely demolishes the building right after I jump.

Chapter Notes

That's right girlies we're in the Hozier part of this arc now. Fear what comes, FEAR WHAT COMES!

Happy Easter to those who celebrate! And if you don't, go buy discounted chocolate anyway.

Vyvanse has made me ✨insane✨, I keep forgetting to eat and my teeth hurt from constantly grinding them and if I chew through my cheeks anymore I'll have some very interesting piercings, but the focus is focusing for like the first time in my life so there's that.

This chapter is something else entirely, and you have to wonder if Ed was created only to suffer. Love them tho, that my pookie wookie right there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"SHOW YOURSELVES! STRAWHAT CREW!" Oars yells in that two-toned discordant howl.

"I think this is my worst nightmare," I say faintly.

"Is that Robin and Franky in the rubble?!" Nami screeches.

“Oh look, Chopper and Usopp. Hi guys!” I call down to the bridge where my friends are gaping at Oars between the castillations.

“DO YOU FUCKING SEE THAT THING?!” Usopp screams up at me, white as a sheet and probably seconds away from tears.

“Yeah, crazy right?!” I laugh, very much manic. I think I’ve descended past panic into peace.

“Be careful! You almost stepped on that beautiful woman!” Sanji’s voice snarls from Oars mouth.

“That’s the point, stupid!” Zoro’s voice growls back.

“Oh dear lord,” I whisper. “It’s fighting with itself. Dear lord.”

“It’s face is so scary!” Brook shrieks.

“Gotta catch… the pretty lady!” Oars roars in both voices, lunging forward with both arms outstretched at Robin before being stopped short by an explosion.

“Hands off, big guy!” Franky shouts, flipping his hand cannon out and opening fire on the giant.

Oars cries out in outrage and in a flash, kicks his leg out and sends Franky absolutely rocketing into the mansion. “FRANKY!” we all scream out. Oars grabs his falling body in a crushing grip.

“He’s gonna kill him!” Zoro yells.

Oars is suddenly nailed in the head with a concussive fire shot. All eyes turn to Usopp where he's stood shaking on the bridge, Kabuto drawn and still held aloft from the shot.

"Oh, he's fucked," Nami whimpers.

Oars throws Franky to the ground as he turns toward the bridge. He lifts one massive limb and reads something off his forearm before vigorously shaking his head to put the flames out. He then points one menacing finger at the bridge.

"Shit! Draw him over here!" Zoro orders.

"Fuck. FUCK! HEY! HEY YOU BIG DUMB IDIOT! UP HERE!" Sanji hollers, waving his arms and generally creating a lot of noise. Oars is already lifting one leg and has it poised toward the bridge.

"What are you doing?!" Nami shrieks. "Stop it! He's gonna attack us!"

"That's the point! LOOK UP HERE DUMBASS!" Sanji continues.

Oars turn from the bridge to our perch. "Ah. That isn't great," Brook mutters. "Perhaps we should get out of the way?"

"I've got Nami!" I yelp, grabbing her around the waist and jumping off the roof while she screams. Great timing too, since Oars absolutely demolishes the building right after I jump.

"OH MY GOD OH MY GOD!" Nami screams, clinging hard to me while I twist my gravity in spirals to slow our momentum until we land just a little too hard on the ground beside Robin.

"Ow," I wheeze, halfway collapsing. My head fucking *hurts*. "I only got booted through like — one wall this time, why am I in so much pain?"

“Is it the excessive blood all over your shoulders?” Robin asks, pulling one of my arms over hers.

“So I got stabbed a little, it happens to everyone,” I grumble.

“It’s true, it happens to everyone,” Brook confirms.

We all jump. “Where the fuck did you come from?!” Nami squawks.

“I jumped after you. Your cook and swordsman are still up there,” he explains. We all quickly turn to the bridge just as Sanji is absolutely booted into the ground while Zoro tries to attack Oars’ head.

We all shriek as Oars’ giant arms swing above us and yanks two pillars off the building and fends Zoro off with them like they’re swords, sending him smashing into the ground under the bridge before sticking one of them in his mouth and ripping another off.

“Sweet mercy he’s using three pillar style,” Nami whimpers.

“This is stupid!” Sanji’s voice rumbles from Oars, muffled and slurred around the pillar.

“You’re stupid!” Zoro’s voice shoots back, not slurred in the least.

“Let’s just get them!” they say in unison.

“What the fuck has my life become?” I weep.

“I don’t know how, but this is somehow your fault,” Nami says accusingly. She’s probably right. In a roundabout sort of way everything that is different from the original timeline is my fault, good or bad.

This is distinctly in the bad category.

“He’s turning his attention over here,” Brook announces. All of our heads shoot over as Oars turns toward us.

“Do we scatter again?!” Nami shrieks.

“I don’t think that is a very bright idea, we would be picked off one by one,” Robin says morbidly.

“Dying in a group is better?!” Nami shoots back.

“NO DYING TODAY!” I shout, smacking them both.

“Agreed,” Brook adds.

“We’re bad bitches, we kill him first!” I proclaim. “How to take down a big opponent? Put him off balance, turn his strength against him, and hit him fucking hard!”

Robin crosses her arms. “I can put him off balance.”

Nami raises her trembling Clima-Tact with a shaky smile. “I can help.”

“I believe turning is your specialty,” Brook chuckles. “Which leaves the hard hitting to me. Time is short and your friends’ shadows are at stake — so let’s send this monstrosity back

from whence it came!"

"YEAH!" the girls and I holler.

"I'll go right, Brook you go left, ladies front and centre!" I order as Oars rapidly approaches. "Let's bring this motherfucker to his knobby knees!"

Me and Brook shoot off to the sides. I leap over and onto the rubble left at the front of Hogback's mansion, veering as close to Oars as is advisable while he's still on his feet.

I watch as Robin sprouts a pair of arms from Oars' head, bitch slapping them into his good eye. Zoro's voice howls through the pillar before Sanji's is taking over. "Hey! Pretty lady! Don't do stuff like that, he needs that to see!"

Does that mean the right eye, the one with the scar crossing over it, is the one being controlled by Zoro? …That's fucking hilarious and terribly ironic. Poses a bit of a challenge with the other eye since it's basically just a creepy ghost light.

Nami starts spinning her staff, talking rapidly to Robin in a volume I can't hear from here. Robin nods and suddenly rows of her arms are poking up along the underside of Oars' own and down along his ribs.

Then they start tickling him. Oars freezes for a long moment before he starts doing this weird little jig, two high pitched giggles creating an incredibly unsettling symphony.

"ZORO IS SUPER TICKLISH ON HIS LEFT SIDE RIGHT UNDER HIS BOOB!" I holler across the battlefield. The first time I accidentally touched him there while trying to nap on him he threw me overboard, then had to haul me up while I laughed at his tomato red face.

"Thank you, Detective!" Robin calls back, sprouting more hands in that area and sending Zoro's part of Oars' voice howling even louder.

The seconds Robin bought pay off as a thick cloud finally forms from Nami's Clima-Tact and coalesces around his face. "Wha — hey! Turn the lights back on!" Oars shouts.

"I'm also helping!" Usopp's voice hollers across the way, his head popping up over the parapet on the bridge, then there's something shooting from his Kabuto to Oars' feet.

"What was that?" Oars says, turning towards Usopp's voice blindly. As his stance shifts, his feet slide in the oil that Usopp apparently fired. "Wuh — wuh—" Oars stutters, flailing to keep his balance.

There's a burst of flower petals as Robin grows a cascade of arms from the oil, grabbing onto Oars' leg and yanking.

Oars goes down hard, just barely missing where Brook is waiting. Guess that takes care of the whole turning part of the job. Damn, I was really useless there, wasn't I?

Wait…

"Ed! Captain Kuro his ass!" Usopp screams from on high.

Oh my god *fuck yes*.

I see Brook start to move and take aim. I let off a shot with both of the dials from my left gun and a column of fire blasts out, landing right at the oil and lighting up Oars' backside like a Christmas tree.

"Oh yeah, that feels great," I mumble appreciatively.

Then Brook is suddenly walking towards me while sheathing his sword. “Admittedly I am feeling quite under the weather — quite literally with your friend’s tactics, yohohoho! So this isn’t my strongest work,” he says mildly, just strolling away from Oars as he tries frantically to swipe the flames and oil off himself, only succeeding in spreading it around.

Then, just like that stupid dumbass fucking spider, thick and semi-coagulated blood shoots across Oars’ body like a racing stripe, the flames being snuffed up by a heavy gust of wind I can feel all the way over here.

I whistle even more appreciatively as Oars stays down. “Nicely done regardless, teamwork for the win.”

One second I’m trying to get Brook to first bump me while he tries to figure out how to make his bone work for that, the next I’m flying across the ground from him pushing me because Oars’ stupid ass got back up and was lunging for us.

“SHIIIIIIT—” I yell, bracing for impact. It doesn’t come nearly as hard as I was expecting — mostly because Robin, in all her infinite wisdom and kindness, catches me in a net of arms before the broken stone ground can.

I’m slid down the net until Robin is right there below, catching me with my arm over her shoulder and a grimace. “That certainly could have gone better,” she says dully. Nami, who runs up right behind her, nods frantically in agreement.

Oars straightens from where he temporarily got one of his pillar swords stuck in the ruins of the mansion. “Booo! Stop running!” he demands. Unfortunately, that gives me a bit of an idea.

“I hate this so fucking much,” I mutter. “We have to handicap this guy asap, Robin can you get me up to his arm?” I ask, removing myself from her shoulder and shaking my own out.

She gives me a concerned look. “I can try, are you going to be ok?”

I wave her off. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Nami slaps her hand onto her forehead. “We’re screwed.”

Robin takes my hands in hers, then starts backing away. As she does, more arms extend off from hers until there’s a chain of them from her to me and she starts swinging like she’s gearing up to throw me like a flail or slingshot.

I run along the curve of her swing, then at the last second jerk my gravity to the side as she sends me flying through the air towards Oars. I feel air skim across my flailing limbs until I finally reach the giant and crash land onto one of his huge forearms.

He blinks down at me, one eye gigantic but ordinary looking and the other just a deeply unnerving glow from somewhere in the cavern of his socket.

“What’re you doing, gorgeous?” Sanji’s voice questions in that muffled slur.

“Get off, insect,” Zoro’s demands.

I drop to my stomach and latch onto his limb, feeling out with my powers for the tether holding him together. It’s in a completely different level than Ryuma’s; where his was a thread, Oars is as thick and corded as telephone cable. I gape stupidly at the scale for a second before refocusing on my task.

I grasp the intangible connection and wrench.

“What are you doing?!” both voices shriek, which only serves to amplify the intense migraine that suddenly cripples me.

I scream out as intense pain rips through my skull, blood gushing thick and hot out of my nose and my hold on Oars going completely loose.

Without so much as severing the connection, I drop from Oars all on my own. He takes advantage of my inability to fucking move and my brain basically going offline and swings at me with one of his pillars, hammering me like a nail into the ground.

I crash and roll across rubble until I come to a stop, limp and in pain as blood pours out of my face and I find myself unable to move at all.

I'm abruptly turned onto my back and choke on my blood as it rushes from my nose into the back of my throat until I'm flipped into my stomach, arms supporting me as I gag and heave in breath.

It takes a long second for my hearing to come back online. "Ed?! Holy shit Ed please please be ok oh my god fuck fuck fuck—" Nami hisses frantically.

I groan and lean into her. "Ow," I moan. "Bad idea. Really bad idea."

"No shit!" she hisses. "What the fuck did you even do?!"

"Better question, did that accomplish anything at all?" I mumble, trying to get my jelly arms under myself to push into a seated position.

"Erm — kinda? His arm was sideways for a second, it gave Brook an opening to run for whatever it was he was running for, since Oars couldn't aim for shit," she offers, helping me sit up.

Hm. Good enough, for a first go at it. "You're welcome," I groan. "Lemme at him, I'm gonna try again."

"WHAT?!" Nami shrieks, stopping short when I wince and duck my head into my hands. "I mean, what? Ed look at yourself, doing that again could kill you!" she whispers harshly.

“I got caught off guard,” I say roughly. “But they’re *my* damn powers, I’m the boss of them, not the other way around. Limits are for suckers, and I’m not gonna make the same mistake twice. I won’t try to snap the connection this time, that was obviously stupid.”

“What are you gonna do, then?” she asks trepidatiously.

I struggle to my feet with her help and glare at the giant hunk of dead meat. “I’m gonna turn this fucker on his head.”

There’s a moment of silence as Nami registers the pun, then groans and smacks me on the shoulder while I cackle.

“THAT WASN’T ENOUGH SALT! NOT ENOUGH SALT!” Usopp screams from the bridge.

The bridge is promptly destroyed by Oars slamming the pillars in both of his hands into it. Well, I guess the one I fucked still hasn’t recalibrated in his head at being in the right position and ends up halfway embedded in Hogback’s mansion, but point stands the bridge is fucking decimated.

“Shit—” Nami gasps, hand flying to her mouth.

“Oh my god is that everyone but us down?” I ask with mounting horror.

“I’m also here,” Robin says, suddenly beside us. We both shriek and jump like a foot in the air.

“Wonderful. Goth girl takeover, then. We totally got this,” I mutter, shucking off my coat as Oars turns toward the sound of our voices.

“Plan?” Nami prompts.

“A vague one,” I offer. “Robin, you wanna toss me again?”

“After the way that last attempt went, I’m not all that keen,” she says dryly. “If you have a better strategy that won’t end the same, I’d be much obliged.”

“Well,” I mutter. “I make no promises.”

“Ed,” she says flatly. “I will throw you anywhere you’d like if it won’t kill you. I need a promise this won’t kill you.”

I wince a little then flip my hair dramatically. “I’m too sexy to die, no big dead guy will be the one to kill me. Whoever gets that honour will have to be from this century,” I proclaim.

Both of the girls sigh heavily. “If you die I’ll bring you back to kill you myself,” Nami mutters.

“I love the way you sweet talk me,” I tease. “We’re just buying time for Luffy to heroically show up and save us, yeah? It’ll be fine.”

“You better be right about that,” Robin warns.

I silently agree with that sentiment. “Alright ladies, launch my ass to the moon.”

“Navigator, if you would,” Robin murmurs, gesturing to Nami.

She groans long and loud, snapping her Clima-Tact to full length and stabbing it into the ground. “Don’t die,” she advises, holding a hand out. I take hers, then Robin’s when she

offers it.

“Hey, what are you guys doing?” I hear Franky’s voice ask.

I turn to look for his stupid ass, so I don’t even see what they do. One second I’m bracing, next I’m fucking flying through the air. There’s a deafening crack of thunder behind me and Nami’s voice screaming through the sky. “HEY! OVER HERE, TALLASS!”

I’m flung through the air like a cartwheeling comet, it’s worse than the last time because I’m honestly so dizzy I might vomit, and I’m headed right for Oars’ back. Or I am until he turns to look at where Nami is because of her yelling.

“Fuuuuuuuck!” I wail, seeing the world in actual fucking technicolour. Why is everything blue?!

It’s blue because I’m headed right for the wave patterned curtain in Oars stomach. OH FUCK AM I ABOUT TO COME FACE TO FACE WITH MORIA?! SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT—

I crash through the curtain and get tangled before smashing into the floor of the… stomach room. “If you’re gonna kill me, gimme a minute!” I request, eyes closed in a tight grimace while my entire body throbs in rhythm with my head.

I finally pry my eyes open a few seconds later. “Oh. Sweet,” I mumble when I see the room is empty. “I think? Where the fuck is he, then?”

Honestly, not my problem right now. I struggle to my feet and wobble as the entire room moves, and I know damn well it isn’t just my head swimming. I stumble across the small room to the curtain and shuck it open a bit to peer outside.

I nearly fucking fall face first right out and only save myself by grabbing onto the curtain in a vice grip as Oars moves forward in a step. I blink a couple times to clear the stars from my

vision and get an absolutely fantastic view as Oars snatches Franky, who is there now I guess, off the ground and fucking yeets him.

"Oh. That's not ideal," I say faintly, tracking his progress as he sails over the forest, screaming something I can't make out. Good lord Oars' got an arm on him. "His ass just keeps getting taken out of the fight." I clap my hands and look around the tiny room. "Welp. This is pretty much the ideal place. At the very least another opportunity for the 'turn your stomach' pun."

The first go around was a disaster, no doubt about it, and this has to be better. The solution? Don't be an overachiever. Last time my stupid ass went pedal to the metal full gas no stop and I am #NotDoingThatAgain. The solution? Don't be a tryhard.

Basically I'm not gonna fucking snap his fucking arm off. That was dumb.

"I'd make a pun, but I don't wanna waste all my good material where no one will hear it," I say to myself.

It's Zoro and Sanji inside this fucking monstrosity. And me on a technicality, but that is mostly said for laughs. That means that at the very least on a subconscious level, Sanji's instincts are controlling the legs and Zoro's are controlling the arms. Put those two segments in discord and…

It's a damn good plan.

"You better fucking work, and you better not fucking kill me," I mutter with just a bit of heat, moving my feet at least shoulder width apart, bending my knees, and putting my arms out to my sides.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

I reach out with my powers and tap into the feeling of Oars body. That thick corded tether greets my senses and I mostly disregard it. I can feel my blood pulse through my head and behind my eyelids and my facial muscles twitch.

"C'mon, baby. You got this," I murmur.

Like unscrewing a jam jar, I turn the two parts of Oars in different directions.

It takes so so *so* much effort. It's like benchpressing a fucking building — the pressure crushes down on my bones and I feel my ears pop again, this time I can feel myself shout more than hear it; the blood that suddenly pours into them muffles it near completely. More blood rushes out of my nose and my vision goes fuzzy.

I can feel the thick cording change, like when you try to split a piece of string from the middle and it refuses to stay that way if you don't hold it. I'm not gonna be able to hold this indefinitely, and frankly me staying in here to hold contact so he stays put is the dumbest fucking thing I could do.

The solution? Stick a fucking pike though the string. Metaphorically. Devil Fruits are fucking weird, and the only real limit on ones powers comes from ones perceived notions of limits.

In other words? Fuck the ten second limit. If I can imagine/hallucinate/sense that cord with my consciousness, I can jam some of that consciousness into the cord like a toothpick through a hoodie string to keep it static.

It feels like an out of body experience as I crash to my knees, collapsing onto my face when my muscles won't respond to my overtaxed brain. Time goes liquid as I bleed in the small room in Oars' stomach, breathing slowly and staring at the weird walls.

I'm broken from my stupor by someone roughly colliding with me as they supposedly fall into the room, nearly flattening me. "Ed?! What the fuck happened to your face? You make out with a vampire or some shit?" I hear Zoro's voice cut through the daze.

I lazily trail my eyes up until I'm looking at him. He's staring at the curtain he fell through with a look of absolute confusion. Then he turns back to me and blanches. "Oh my god are you dead?!"

"Not dead," I slur, weakly getting my arms under myself and half pushing myself up before semi collapsing on Zoro. "Did it work?"

He smears a hand across my face and grimaces at it when it comes away covered in blood. "What? Did what work?"

"Jam jar," I respond after a few second's delay.

He makes a distressed noise. "I think you have several concussions. I'm not equipped to deal with this."

"Gimme a minute, I'll be fine," I groan, rolling onto my back and taking several deep breaths. "Don't suppose you have an ibuprofen on you, hah?"

Zoro wordlessly shoves his hand into his pocket and smacks it over my mouth. Honestly, my throat being semi lubricated by blood makes it easier to dry swallow the pill. "You worry me," he says.

"Love you, baby," I huff out.

"Great, you're loopy too," he bitches.

"Not loopy, just very grateful to have you around, bestie," I shoot back. "Help me sit up, my fantastic ass makes it hard to lay on my back."

"Yeah, you're fine," Zoro mutters, pulling me up and placing a hand on my back. "You ready to go back out there? I should get you to Chopper."

“I’m fine. Put me back in coach,” I wheeze, spitting out some excess blood. “Ew.”

“I specifically am not allowed to tell you to sit this one, but sit this one out,” he says, rolling to his feet in a crouch and heaving me over his shoulders in a fireman's carry.

“Make me, you goddamn garden gnome,” I grumble, idly kicking my feet. I wonder if my ten second countdown just started.

“Oh, brace yourself. He’s about to run into the mansion again,” Zoro announces as he stands up with the curtain open.

“He’s about to what—”

We’re flung out of Oars’ stomach with matching screams as he runs into the mansion.

“I can’t catch us!” I scream over the rushing wind. “My powers might straight up kill me!”

“SHIT!” Zoro screams back. Then we’re jerked to a halt by a huge net of arms blooming into place, the weight of our catch making it dip low until we bang gently off the ground and the arms dissipate. I love Robin so much.

“Ow,” I deadpan.

“ED! YOU’RE COVERED IN BLOOD, WHAT DID I TELL YOU?!” Nami screams as she comes tearing up to me. “When I said don’t die, I didn’t mean get close enough you can kiss death’s ass!”

“Not dead,” I reiterate. “Living. Very much alive.”

“Not for much longer if you keep acting like this,” Robin says sweetly, coming up and gently swatting me on the arm. “Good job, though.”

I blink at her. “I did it? Jam jar?”

“Jam jar,” she confirms.

I swing my head around to where I think Oars fell and stare dumbfounded as he stumbles out of the crushed ruins of the mansion. “Oh my god. Jam jar,” I say faintly.

His legs are on backwards. His *fucking legs* are on *backwards* . His *fucking legs* are ***still on backwards.***

I’m a genius.

Chapter End Notes

Lmao. What an idiot.

I watched both Now You See Me's yesterday and spent the whole time trying to figure out why that one guy seemed so familiar, only to google him when I was done and realize it's because he voices Lloyd from the fucking Lego Ninjago movie.

Also gang WE HAVE A PODFIC NOW!!!! The absolutely phenomenal presenceofdarkness has started recording it, the first chapter is up and I encourage you to go check it out. It's linked in the related works so give'er a listen!

Next up, because of course, we have art of the baddies. I'm not gonna make a joke about the goth girl takeover and *not* make goth girl takeover art. (Ed is an honourary goth girl, them's the breaks kid.)

Chapter 92: Chapter Ninety Two: In The Rising Sun

Chapter Summary

Lost In Dreams - Weyes Blood

“I’m…” I trail off, watching him try to stand up with very minimal progress. “I’m so amazing.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter title is ironic because Ed spends a majority of it in the dark.

Disclaimer! You know my ass has no idea how anatomy works. All of this is wrong, and honestly I need you to know I tried. I googled shit for an hour trying to make sense of the anatomy of a head, but NOPE. NONE OF THAT SHIT MADE SENSE. So uh. I made up shit that is not true and we can chalk it up to Oars being a 500 year old frozen giant corpse and the fact that he is very much not human. Maybe giants are just built different, how would you know? If you know biology, no you don't. This is a fanfiction of an anime where the main character once walked through a snake's eyeball and opened it's eyelid from inside the iris, DO NOT COME FOR ME.

So basically this chapter is an exercise in how far I can force your suspension of disbelief. No one explain how it's wrong to me in the comments, I do not want to hear it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oars, whose head is facing this way, spots us and points with one of his pillar swords. “You!” he shouts in Zoro’s voice.

“Fix this!” Sanji’s voice shrieks.

Then he’s turning around so his legs are facing frontwards and Zoro’s voice starts making squawking sounds. The front half starts turning again so it can see where it’s going, which just throws the legs off course and makes him trip over himself and fall to the ground in a graceless heap.

“I’m…” I trail off, watching him try to stand up with very minimal progress. “I’m so amazing.”

“The cook and I’s shadows can’t be that stupid, can we?” Zoro asks with disgust as Oars nearly brains himself on the mast mansion, all while arguing with himself in his two voices.

“Honestly, I’m a little shocked it’s taking so long for them to start working together,” I say with a frown.

Zoro scowls at me. “What does that mean?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Remember in Alabasta? You guys can work as one entity if you try. I’m just surprised he isn’t doing the same.”

“It’s because unlike shadows, we actually have brains,” Sanji says. I jump and squawk, not even having heard him approach. “My darling, we really need to have a talk about your recklessness during fights. This is getting a little ridiculous.”

“But you really can’t argue with the results,” I shoot back, gesturing at Oars as he accidentally hits himself in the head with one of his pillar swords. *“And* you have no room to talk.”

“That was all your shadow mosshead, mine had nothing to do with that,” Sanji says dryly, ignoring all of what I said.

“Shut up,” Zoro groans. “I’ve had enough of this damn guy, let’s kick his ass into the stratosphere.”

“ED WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE?!” Chopper shrieks right in my ear. I shriek back twice as loud as yet another person just shows up beside me.

Oh my god, is my hearing damaged?! Damnit if listening to music in headphones so loud you could hear if from across the room didn't destroy my ears, it's not fucking fair that this would. I swing my head around to look for Usopp, and scream when he just fucking *appears* beside me between two turns of my head.

"This is bullying! You're bullying me!" I harp, swatting him on the arm.

"Not my fault in the slightest," he denies.

"Can we just kill this guy and be done with it? Brook went to get salt, we just need to keep this fucking… *flesh mound* from squirming around," Zoro states.

"Let's just turn him into minced meat. Can't squirm when all your nerves are severed," Sanji suggests, lighting up a cigarette.

"I'm not above bleeding him out," Robin says pleasantly.

"He's gotta have some kind of exploitable weakness," Chopper says dubiously.

"I'm super scared right now," Usopp announces.

"Do you think if I tried hard enough I would turn off his nervous system..?" I ask slowly.

"Don't even try it," everyone says in unison.

I put my hands up. "Yeesh, sorry for even suggesting it."

“If Franky was here, I’d suggest tactic fifteen…” Usopp says thoughtfully.

Chopper’s eyes light up. “Can we? Can we please?”

“We don’t have Franky for the body, it’s not really an option,” Sanji says apologetically.

“If Chopper gets big he can be the base,” I offer. “And I’ll form the head.”

All the boys’ faces light up. “YES!”

“No,” Nami says disparagingly. “You’re super mega injured, you’re not doing the… what the fuck did you call it?”

“Pirating docking 6!” Usopp and Chopper shout.

"NO!” I say adamantly. “We are not calling it that!”

“It’s better then whatever the fuck it was you wanted to call it,” Zoro shoots back.

“There is no universe where calling it *docking* instead of Voltron is better—” I argue.

“Why? Literally why?” Nami groans into her hands.

“Please it has to be something else, I’ll even give up Voltron. Just not docking. I beg of you,” I plead. In my defence, as much as thinking about Voltron makes me want to rip my guts out of my body, the name is funny as fuck in this context.

“What’s docking?” Chopper asks innocently.

I place a solemn hand on his shoulder. “I haven’t the strength to tell you.”

He gives me a confused look and Nami clears her throat loudly. “Not that any of that matters, since neither Robin nor I will be acting as the other arm. Moving on!”

Despite the loud protests of the boys, I speak up. “Guys we are on such a tight deadline right now it’s not even funny,” I say loudly. “My sense of time is ass but I’m guessing we’re somewhere around the 4am-ish point?”

“Might be earlier,” Sanji says with a frown at the fog.

“I have an idea,” Robin announces. We all turn to her. “We got halfway done with our task, but had to abandon it once Oars… animated. So that big bomb Franky made? It’s still planted in that thing’s brainstem.”

We all stare in silence for a second.

“We’ve… we’ve been hitting this thing while it’s been carrying an active bomb?” I ask blankly. “We were doing that and you didn’t say anything until now?”

Robin shrugs. “My bad.”

I nod slowly and silently. “Alright. Ok. Cool. When I don’t feel like I’m leading an ant conga line in my head, I think this will upset me. Any suggestions on how we deal with the active bomb, then?”

“I don’t wanna diffuse another bomb,” Usopp cuts in, sounding appropriately panicked.

“We don’t have a contingency for this!” Chopper shrieks.

“It’s not technically active,” Robin says imperiously. “It’s off, we didn’t get to turn it on before we had to stop. If you can get to his brainstem, you can set it off yourself. There should be a five or so minute delay already on the timer.”

“This is so G-Force of us,” I mumble. “I’m in.”

“You are not going in anywhere,” Zoro says threateningly. Chopper nods adamantly along.

I groan. “C’mon, someone just has to go in and turn it on, yeah? It can’t possibly be that hard —”

“SCATTER!” Zoro suddenly yells, sweeping me up under his arm and lunging to the side.

“WHAT THE FUCK—” I shriek as stone shatters loudly behind us. From over Zoro’s shoulder I see the smashed remnants of one of Oars’ pillars embedded where we were all once standing, the rest of my compatriots doing just what Zoro said and scattering.

“Stop sitting around and die already!” Oars yells in both voices. The legs are still on backwards, but he seems to be making it work.

“At least you bought us some time?” Zoro mutters.

“That is so not what we need right now,” I hiss. “Where the fuck is Luffy?!”

“Being stupid somewhere that isn’t here, we gotta do this ourselves until he inevitably arrives!” Zoro snaps. “Do you think you can be useful or do I need to get you out of here?!”

“I’m always useful, if only as eye candy!” I shoot back. “Put me down, I’ll fucking shoot him!”

“What good will that do?! Come up with an actual plan, *detective!”* Zoro yells, swinging around and running in a wide arc back towards Oars. “You have ten seconds!”

“Don’t I always!” I snarl. Ok ok ok ok ok — fucking balls what do I — Oh. Oh that’s a terrible idea. “Zoro,” I say calmly. “Throw me at his face.”

“Excuse me?!” he shrieks.

“THROW ME AT HIS DAMN FACE!” I roar, hitting him on the shoulder. “I’M GOING IN!”

“OW! FINE!” He yells back, switching his grip on me and doing a weird mix between a running long jump startup and the lead into javelin throw, then swings around hard and flings me like a flail. “IF YOU DIE I’LL MURDER YOU DEADER!”

I jerk my gravity and yell as it makes my head throb, and notice as I’m falling towards Oars’ face that he starts slowly twisting back into the correct position. I hastily drop my hold of my own gravity once I’m close enough to just fall regularly to his face and heave a sigh of relief as he stops spinning back.

I crash land on his brow bone with a yelp. “Oh ew, why is he leathery,” I gag, scrambling to my feet and nearly falling as he keeps moving.

I glance over the edge down at my friends as Sanji fucking flings Zoro, who has somehow gotten a hold of Franky’s nunchaku, at Oars. “ED! GRAB ONTO SOMETHING!” he bellows as he careens forward.

Solid advice, so I slide down and swing in front of Oars big dumb eye, the empty socket.

“What the—” both of Oars’ voices say.

“Hi,” I greet, slipping inside the socket. “Please excuse the intrusion.”

“What the actual fuck—” Oars, in his Sanji voice, starts before he cuts himself off with a yell as I guess real Zoro’s attack hits.

“Anime logic, don’t fail me now,” I mumble, inching toward the freaky light deep in the socket. I take one last look at the beautiful outside world, and take the plunge.

The last thing I hear is a loud resounding laugh echoing through the air.

“Kishishishishi!”

———

I know next to nothing about anatomy, but I’m pretty fucking sure whatever I’m doing is not correct in the slightest.

You know that fact about swimming through a great blue whale’s veins? Yeah fuck that fact this is so much worse.

“Ew ew ew—” I repeat like a mantra, army crawling through the fucking trenches of this monstrosities… tubes? Maybe tubes.

“Just go in and find the brainstem, she said. It’ll be easy, she said,” I grumble under my breath. “I don’t even know where the fucking brainstem is. At the base of the fucking brain? Hell if I know! This was stupid.”

I'm once again violently thrown into the… vein wall thingies as Oars presumably is hit or lurches or moves at all. It's basically pitch fucking black up in this bitch and I am beyond grossed out by having to touch anything in this hellscape.

I don't even know what I'm fucking doing. I nearly failed both science and physical education, I've got no clue where this tunnel leads. Am I on the fucking optic nerve or some shit? I'm too dumb for this.

And the *bomb*. I'm gonna have to activate a *bomb*.

I reach some kind of… intersection of sorts? There's two more small paths that lead from this one, and another one that seems to head the same direction I came from.

"This is so dumb. I hate this," I grumble, twisting around to yank my pistol out. "Literally, fuck this."

I aim my impact pistol at the wall thing in between the two opposite paths and fire a sword slash at it. There's some incredibly unpleasant noises that result from that, and when the… I hesitate to even call it dust, settles, there's a large gouge in the…

You know what, maybe I'll just stop trying to describe this awful place in a way that makes sense. There's a big fissure.

I'm abruptly tossed into the wall as Oars presumably reacts to the pain. "I will cheer so fucking *loud* when this guy dies," I grit out, righting myself in the tight space and aiming for a second shot at the same spot.

When my gun adamantly refuses to fire a slash I pause. I look down at the dial. I think back to the last time me and Zoro sparred and I absorbed any of his slashes.

…Shit.

"Am I gonna have to hack this motherfucker apart *manually?"* I weep, thinking of just how much worse my shoulder pain can get.

Literally what else do I have? Firing an impact shot, however useful, would fully rip my arms off in this state. I'm willing to pull a lot of reckless shit, but the tendons in the shoulders will genuinely not hold if I put any more stress on them. My other pistol just shoots fucking fire and in a place this enclosed, I'd be cooked like toast.

I sit still for a second.

"Shit!" I moan, rolling onto my side. *"Fuuuuuuck!"*

This is going to be so embarrassing to retell later. I shove my hand deep into my pocket and pull out my penknife.

"You," I tell it solemnly, "are my only hope. Do not betray me."

I wiggle up to the gouge, and shove the fucking knife in. All three damned inches of it.

It's… Oh my god it's so fucking gross. I think I'm gonna be sick. It also didn't do shit or fuck, so that's great.

"This… is going to take forever."

I start hacking, because genuinely what the fuck else am I supposed to do? I just start carving into the fucking wall.

“Shoulda stolen John’s fucking swords, then he’d actually be useful for something,” I grumble under my breath.

Wait. I pause, my penknife halfway back for another strike. What I did in John’s fight, with the wall. Could I do that with this? I should really lay off my powers because if I pass out or have a brain hemorrhage in here no one is gonna be able to save me, but…

Honestly, I think I’ll take that possibility over doing this for the next half hour any day.

“Hopefully this doesn’t make this harder for the people outside if I fuck this up,” I mumble.

Oars had seemed pretty damn close to overcoming the whole ‘legs on backwards’ thing, so maybe I’m not even really helping with it anymore regardless?

I’m stalling and trying to justify this to myself. I snap my penknife closed and drop it in my pocket. I put both hands on the gross ass flesh wall, ignoring the oils and whatever that it was leaking from the stabbing (it wasn’t bleeding from it, so small mercies) and pray.

I start by dropping my control on Oars’ body.

It’s like surfacing from the depths of the ocean, immediately I feel a pressure I barely even noticed disappear from my body and my head clears like a shockwave. I gasp in air that can finally fill out my lungs in a meaningful way and slump over just a bit.

Being in here suddenly feels like a much worse idea, given my sudden clarity. Why do I make such stupid choices?

“‘C’mon, someone just has to turn it on, can’t be that hard!’ Stupid fucking me from ten minutes ago — that *idiotic* ***whoooooore—”*** I grumble in a mocking pitch.

Without the pressure on my bones threatening to make them snap and crumple into dust, and the fog in my head choking out rational thought, I figure there's a much higher chance of this actually working.

"Please have something behind you worth doing this for," I plead with the flesh wall.

Then I turn it. Like a revolving door, it spins like a dime 90° until it's perpendicular to the rest of the wall. By some stretch of a miracle, it's only about a foot and a half thick, and there's actually something behind it.

I stick my head through the gap it's created, and gaze down into the chasm. "Really wish I had my phone at a time like this," I muse. "Never thought I'd miss the flashlight feature so much."

So yeah, it's dark and very hard to see. I don't know exactly how large the space is, but somewhere that could be ten to fifty feet below me, there's some kind of dull red light.

"Guess that'll be it then?"

Because really, what else would be red and glowing inside this thing's head but the bomb? The question of how I'm going to get down there, however, remains.

I take a second to assess my head and body. I'm not splitting apart at the seams anymore, and that ibuprofen seems to be doing its job, so I think I can manage to Spider Climb my way down there if I'm quick and not an absolute ignoramus about it.

I shimmy through the gap entirely, crouching down and half lowering myself over the edge before turning my gravity. My headache flares to life again in the split second before I drop my control of the flesh wall, then I begin my walk down to the light.

"Shoulda have brought Usopp with me, at least he would know where the bomb on switch is," I grumble.

I'm suddenly violently thrown from my feet as Oars lurches or some shit. I lose hold on my powers and start freefalling down the gorge, screaming as the red light gets closer and closer. I jerk myself to a halt as soon as my wits return, and just barely miss slamming into the bomb.

I blink harshly at the lit row of red zeros mere inches from my face. "I can't tell if the universe hates me or loves me."

I shuffle down the wall until I'm crouched over the bomb, squinting in the dim red light to try and make out the buttons or whatever. There's a big square one on the left, and a smaller circle one on the right.

"Are you fucking kidding me."

I feel like I'm not allowed to be surprised in the slightest that Franky's Continent-Puller-Super-Bomb™ is basically a Saw trap, but I'm going to be indignant anyway.

I weigh my options and the possible consequences of pressing the wrong button.

There's a distinct possibility one of the buttons is the delayed start, and the other is an immediate implosion. It could also be an on switch and a kill switch. We really should have communicated better about the logistics of this thing before it got to this point.

"If I was Franky, what button would I choose?" I mutter to myself. Why couldn't his ass just label things? If there was ever a time for my luck to work.

"Fuck it, we ball."

I jam my finger into the round button. There's a moment of silence.

The third of the red zeros turns into a five.

"YES! YES! I'M THE BEST!" I holler, throwing my arms up. "Now how the fuck do I get out of here?"

…

OH MY GOD I'M STUCK INSIDE WITH THE BOMB. I JUST ARMED A BOMB WITHOUT AN ESCAPE ROUTE. I CAN'T EVEN BLAME IT ON MY HEADACHE SINCE IT'S DULLED TO BASICALLY NON-EXISTENCE.

Oh god oh god. WHERE DOES THE BRAINSTEM LEAD THAT COULD GET ME OUTTA HERE?! IS THERE SOME KINDA TUBE TO THE MOUTH??????

This is the worst. I'm the worst. I smother my face in my hands and groan. The fucking — this is so far past up shit's creek without a paddle, this is stranded in a venerable *shit ocean* on nothing but a deflating air mattress.

I drag my hands down my face. I glance at the numbers and realize I just spent a whole minute lamenting my own stupidity.

"FUUUUUUUUCK!"

I drop my control of my gravity and plunge down the fucking gorge. It's still *pitch fucking black,* so I really am just freefalling in the void, and I'm once again realizing I'm the dumbest damn person I know.

There's something like a crackle that sounds through the air, and I can hear the deafening roar of Oars even from inside him. There's a light that appears somewhere below me. I blink harshly. As the roar stops, the light disappears.

“That’s my exit, better get into the right lane,” I quip to no one, since I stranded myself inside a 200 foot giant by myself with no backup and an explosive device.

I guesstimate where the light was, then right when I think I hit it, jerk my gravity to the side. For a second I think I’ve irreparably fucked myself over and I’m just going to be freefaling in the void *forever,* then I land on the wall or whatever.

I pause for a second to assess how long I think I have, and come to the concussion that stopping to check was a mistake.

“C’mon,” I mutter, “roar again. Yell or some shit. Someone out there better be hitting this motherfucker and hitting him *hard—”*

My prayers are answered, because Oars mouth must reopen as light floods the space below me. I don’t even think about it or pause at the godawful sounds of a giant screaming from the inside, because when I tell you the vocal cords are creating feelings I mean they are *creating feelings,* I just run.

I sprint down the wall until I get to a curve inward toward the light. I throw myself over with reckless abandon as the light begins to dim and things start shifting around me, then I land on something softer than the rest of the shit I’ve been standing on.

The thing under me shifts. I stumble as it undulates and I trip over the textured bumps it’s covered in, nearly slipping as I realize it’s unfortunately quite damp.

“Oh hey did I actually make it to his mouth?” I ask the air. “Wicked. I’m the best.”

I’m nearly thrown off my feet by the… oh my god is this his *tongue* — moving and start half running half tripping across the expanse. I’ve got maybe 30 seconds if I’m being generous, and I don’t fancy being stuck in what is essentially a damp cave when this fucker blows.

Light pours in and I squint as I can suddenly make out the horrors around me — this guy really needs to floss, goddamnit, they need *dental* — and keep dashing for my one and only hope for exit.

His teeth are tall and imposing as doors and I flip my gravity like mad, just barely breaking over the top of them as a deafening bang sounds behind me.

Hot air surges at my back before thick smoke is billowing around me, obscuring my view as I escape the flesh prison.

“WHOOOOOOOOP!” I holler into the open air, refreshing and lovely even through the smog.

I clear the smoke and finally get a clear view of outside.

“What the fuck?” I blurt, trying to make sense of the scene.

One of Oars’ legs is stuck knee deep in the ground, Franky is back and him and Zoro are attacking each other like they have no fucks to give, Sanji and Chopper are MIA, Brook’s entire upper body is jammed into one of the few unshattered parts of the buildings, Nami and Usopp are standing beside some kind of slingshot contraption screaming while Robin buries her head in her hands, and Moria’s deranged laugh is cutting omnipresent though the area.

Robin lifts her head and seems to finally notice me as I plummet towards the ground. “Ed!” she shouts, flinging her arms out.

I reach up as hands shoot from Oars’ stomach and latch on, letting them swing me towards her, Nami and Usopp, and drop into the arm-net-thing she creates to catch me again.

I stumble onto the stone as the ground quakes, the impact of Oars’ body falling over backwards reverberating through the island boat. I peek over my shoulder and grin proudly at the smog still billowing from Oars’ mouth as he lays there still.

I turn back to my friends and plant my hands on my hips. “That’s that. Now what the fuck?!”

“I take it the bomb worked?” Robin remarks.

“I thought you died!” Usopp sobs.

“Do you need a fucking minder to keep you from trying to kill yourself in increasingly stupid and insane ways?!” Nami shrieks, pointing at me threateningly.

I hold both of my hands up and gesture to everything around us. “I ask again; WHAT THE FUCK?!”

“Don’t ‘what the fuck’ me! What the fuck you!” Nami screeches.

“Guys—” Usopp tries to cut in.

“Stop yelling at me!” I yell.

“I’m not yelling!” Nami yells back.

“Guys it’s—” Usopp tries again.

“You *are* yelling! You literally yelled that!” I shout over him.

“If I’m yelling it’s because you deserve it!” she snarls back louder.

“GUYS!” Usopp screams. We pause to look at him and he points to the mast mansion. “OARS IS BACK UP!”

Oars is back up. He’s smoking and swaying, but the motherfucker is back on his stupid ugly ass feet.

“GODDAMNIT!” I scream, clutching at my hair. “I CRAWLED THROUGH THAT THINGS EYE AND RAN ACROSS IT’S TONGUE FOR *NOTHING?!”*

“More news!” Usopp shouts, pointing higher. “Luffy is back!”

“OOOOOOOOOOOI!” our Captain’s voice cuts into the air. “I’M HERE TO KICK ASS!”

“Oh thank *god.”*

Chapter End Notes

If you follow my Tumblr you may or may not have already seen, but I'm doing a big overhaul edit of the fic for it's 1 year anniversary. There's more information about that here if you'd like to see, but the gist is I'm just correcting grammar and punctuation. (Future message from the Big Edit™, it has been very hard. It's day 2 of maintenance and I have been near nonstop working for 10 hours. WORTH IT THO!)

Anyway I am so deeply upset I can't get tøp concert tickets because I'm ✨broke✨ and I wouldn't want to go alone but none of my friends were down to spend hundreds of dollars for a band they weren't all that into. So if any of y'all end up going know I'm living vicariously through you. WAIT LMAO next weeks chapter is a tøp song and I didn't even notice until now bro the brainrot is brainrotting. Yeah I'm in a phase, so what, middle school me would be so fucking enamoured with current me so no one else's opinion matters.

I'VE GOT TWO WEEKS OF CLASSES LEFT AND I WILL GIRLBOSS THROUGH THEM OR DIE TRYING.

Chapter 93: Chapter Ninety Three: We All Need You Now

Chapter Summary

Johnny Boy - twenty one pilots

"WHAT'S WITH THE MAKEOVER?!" I holler up to him, cupping my hands around my mouth. "AND WHERE DID YOU GET A GIANT SWORD?!"

Chapter Notes

I cut my thumb open tripping out of a car this week and I have never felt closer to Ed in my life.

I hope all my Muslim readers had a great Eid and a lovely end to Ramadan, if you were fasting you have my deepest respect — my stupid ass would forget and drink water like an idiot.

LAST WEEK OF CLASS DAMNIT I AM GOING TO SPEND ALL DAY BUSTING MY ASS ON THREE DIFFERENT PROJECTS AND REFORMATTING MY RESUME SO I CAN APPLY TO THIS JOB I WANT THAT WILL ONLY ACCEPT IT UNTIL TOMORROW RAAAAHHHHHH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So Luffy is blue, I'd just like to mention. Like he's giant and looks like a shitty beta version of gear 4, but… the man is *blue.*

"You're seeing this, right? I didn't actually die in that guy's head and am just seeing super weird stuff on the way to hell, right?" I ask faintly.

"Yeah we see it," Usopp says, sounding incredibly unnerved for all the relief he had a moment ago.

"I feel like I'm being fucked with," Nami admits. "This feels like one long poorly told practical joke."

“Isn’t it just,” Robin says dryly.

“WHAT’S WITH THE MAKEOVER?!” I holler up to him, cupping my hands around my mouth. “AND WHERE DID YOU GET A GIANT SWORD?!”

“BUSH PEOPLE!” is Luffy’s only response.

“Shit, alright,” Usopp mutters. “Bush people, why the hell not?”

“Why is he giving Frankenstein Smurf?” I mumble, squinting at Luffy.

“I don’t even know what that means but I know whatever it was was stupid,” Nami deadpans. Fair enough.

“What the hell happened while I was gone?” I ask, once again surveying the battlefield with confusion.

“Er, so Moria is — was — here, he tried to steal Robin’s shadow but Franky finally got back,” Nami starts.

“That was all well and fine until Moria tried to steal *his* shadow,” Robin adds. “He succeeded, obviously, so the swordsman is keeping him occupied.”

“Nami seduced shadow Sanji and shadow Zoro got reaaaally mad,” Usopp snickers.

“I didn’t *seduce* him!” Nami snaps. “I just asked him pretty please to knock it off.”

“And that worked? Why didn’t I think of that?” I mutter.

“If I’m not smarter than you when you’re actively dying of a concussion, I think we’ll have bigger things to worry about,” she says dryly.

“So what’s with the…” I gesture at the slingshot contraption.

Nami groans and Usopp smacks her. “We shot Brook like a lightning rod at Oars,” he says by way of explanation. “He, er, got parried.”

“Parried, right. Can I ask about the laugh track that’s just kinda playing in the background?” I mutter, glancing around like Moria could pop up anywhere.

“About that…” Usopp says slowly.

“Moria smacked Brook so hard he got lodged in the wall. That’s why he’s over there,” Robin supplies helpfully. “Then he took control of Franky and sunk into the ground, the laughing has just been continuous for the past few minutes.”

“That is so fucking ominous. I hate it,” I hiss, eyes darting about the ground.

“You hate it?!” Franky screeches as his and Zoro’s fight drifts past us.

“Fucking find him so I can kick his ass! This is getting old!” Zoro squawks. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to not murder Franky right now?!”

“Thanks, bro, I really appreciate that!” Franky shouts semi-sarcastically.

“KILL HIM!” Zoro screams.

“Fantastic idea, Zoro, as always!” I shout patronizingly at his back as him and Franky fight their way closer to the ruins of Hogback’s mansion. “I’ll get right on that as soon as I can FIND THE MOTHERFUCKER!”

There’s a loud throaty shout from the other side of the battlefield, and then Oars is being full body suplexed into the ground. All of our jaws drop, dust and debris making both me and Usopp hack as it’s displaced with the heavy movement.

“Oh my god,” Usopp croaks out, bent at the knees and coughing.

“Did those bush people give him fucking steroids?!” Nami shrieks, both hands shading her mouth and eyes.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it was *crack* at this rate!” I wheeze, squinting at the distant (still blue) form of our Captain.

“That was… unexpected,” Robin mumbles, brushing dirt off her sleeve.

“Wait, does anybody else see that crowd of people or did I just get some really weirdly shaped dust in my eyes?” Usopp blurts, pointing to the left.

“Oh my god, it’s the bush people!” I shout, elated.

The Thriller Bark Victim's Association have started encroaching out of the forest, attention split between us and Luffy. The girl at the front, with her pink hair, big red lips and dramatic makeup, is identifiable as Lola. She surveys the area with a look of utter bewilderment, and I’m about to call out to her when—

“Kishishishishi!”

Zoro suddenly crashes into the ground beside us as Moria's laugh goes from omnipresent to concentrated from the direction he came from. We all whip that way as Franky collapses boneless to the ground, his shadow clutched in Moria's gloved grip.

"Oh my god why the fuck does he look like that?" I blurt. This is the first time I've actually seen him in person, and HOOOOOLY SHIT. WHAT THE FUCK. That is what the girlies call unholy, unnatural, and entirely unwanted.

"Kishishishi, I'll give you all this; you're much more of a nuisance than I took you for!" he cackles, moving Franky's shadow between his hands like a stress ball. "You've been entertaining, but this is curtains!"

Then Moria swallows Franky's shadow like a meatball. A really weird gross slimy meatball.

Behind him, Oars is fucking piledrived into the ground by Luffy, Blue Edition™. That did not feel like it should have been possible in the slightest, with their incredibly varied weight classes I mean. It kicks up an even worse huge plume of particles and rubble this time, billowing towards us in a semi-solid wall of dust.

Moria becomes naught more a shadow, enrobed by the grime until he's nothing by a hazy dark shape.

I squint against the onslaught, arm held in front of my face. That's probably why I miss it.

"Usopp, do you fancy making us all goggles for next time?" I cough out, turning his direction.

"Shut up," he hacks, then bursts into wheezing coughs.

"Robin, do you have a kerchief or something? If I get more dust in my mouth I'm gonna be shitting bricks in the unmetephorical way," I call, waiting a second as there's no answer. I

can't make her out through the debris. "Nami, could you blow this shit away, *please?"* I groan, waving my hands.

"Yeah, yeah," she grunts. I feel something nearly brain me, probably her damn Clima-Tact, before the dust is dispersing with a gust of wind.

I blink twice at the shadow that's standing where Moria was a moment ago.

"Kishishishi!"

I whip my head to where Robin was standing, where *Moria himself* is now standing, and don't even have the time to lift my arms to guard against the black mass he shoots at me.

It's thick and cloying, heavy like being stuck in an incredibly dense fog. And it's cold, like there hasn't been a touch of sun here in a thousand years. For an infinitesimal amount of time it's just pressure, then the pain hits all at once, and my vision goes from black to white.

_____

"—ease, I don't know how mu—"

I'm walking. My feet hurt.

"—omin—"

My head hurts too. It's dark.

"—ince, he promi—"

Something is heavy in my hand.

“—an’t hold it fore—”

Something is heavy on my head too.

“—ou can’t protect us al—”

It’s so loud. Why is it so loud?

“—ertake the kingdo—”

One of my eyes is shut.

“—ere is he then?! Where is your sa—”

It’s hard to breathe.

“—ve been left for dea—”

I’m bleeding from somewhere.

“Then you are alone!”

“NO!” I shout.

The voice falls silent.

“He’s coming,” I say insistently. “He would never just leave us, ***me,*** *to this!”*

I can’t remember who I’m talking to, or who I’m talking about. But I believe my words with the utmost certainty.

There’s a long moment of silence.

“Then you are a fool, and your hope has killed us all.”

_____

I gasp awake and immediately lash out at whoever is hovering above me.

“Holy moly!” whoever it was gasps, catching my fist before it can connect with their face.

I blink at Lola, my chest heaving as I try to get my bearings. “Sorry…” I rasp between breaths.

“Oh no, no need for that,” she waves off, letting go of my hand. “It’s perfectly understandable. How are you feeling?”

I slowly tilt my head to the side, trying to see what’s going on around me. “Uh… fine, I think,” I mumble. “No worse than before. What..?”

“Moria hit you pretty hard. It hasn't been that long, your Captain has taken down Oars,” she explains, putting a hand on my shoulder when I try to sit up. “You should stay down for a second, catch your breath.”

“No, no need for that,” I murmur out, pushing up anyway. “Luffy took out Oars? Where is Moria, then?”

“He disappeared into the ground after hitting you and your friends with… whatever it was he hit you with,” Lola supplies. “Hey, while I’ve got you here, would you want to marry me?”

I barely blink at that. “Sorry, I’m already hitched. You said Moria was gone? If he’s hiding then I gotta…” I slowly shake my head. I gotta, what? “There’s something I gotta do.”

I’m feeling faint again. I blink slowly, trying to centre myself. I guess one of those blinks stuck harder than I thought, because one second I’m just sitting there, the next people are screaming and someone is trying to move me.

“No, what’s…” I mutter, trying to push whoever it is off me.

“Pardon me, we really have to move you! Oars got back up, we all need to run!” a new person — not Lola — says quickly, trying again to move me. “Your swordsman can’t take him on by himself!”

I blink harshly once, then again, and take a real hard look at the world around me. Oars is there, bloody but on his feet just like they said, and Zoro is standing a ways away with swords in both hands.

“Wait — where are the other two?!” someone shrieks behind us. “They were here a moment ago!”

“Don’t tell me they turned tail and ran before we could?!” someone else wails.

“They *all* made a run for it?!” another person shouts.

Someone punches the ground somewhere behind me. Harsh pants fill the air and people start gasping. “Strawhat!” someone yelps.

My head whips that direction so fast my vision blurs. Through the haze I can still make out Luffy as he pushes himself up onto his knees, still half hunched over stonework made dirty by his blood.

“...Just a bit more… One more attack..!” he wheezes out. *“Damnnit,* that wore me out…”

I shove the guy who’s been manhandling me’s hand off and roll onto my side, slightly surprised by the lack of pain it causes. Just based on what happened before, I thought whatever Moria did was gonna have a more profound effect on my body instead of just my gorgeous head and the full body exhaustion and weakness.

“Luf!” I call over, voice hoarse and shallow. “Need a lift?”

Luffy’s head jerks up and his eyes dart to mine, expression sagging with relief. “Yeah, yes. Please,” he breathes out. “You feel ok? You’re fine?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I confirm, pushing myself up on tremulous arms. “You’re good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he says with a weak laugh.

“If you need some footing…” Robin’s voice comes from somewhere else amongst the rubble, “I can help.”

I can't help the relieved grin that takes over my face at her voice. I honestly wasn't super sure I would be able to get over to Luffy by myself like this. I see her hair first, peeking over a chuck of stone before she's rising to her feet and giving us both a sure smile.

"She didn't run away..!" someone gasps.

"If you need anything else, I can also help!" Brook hisses, appearing over the heads of the crowd — hat first, then afro, then skeletal face — while his bones rattle loud enough we can hear them even over the noise the Victim's Association are making.

"EVEN THE SKELETON GOT UP?!" a guy shrieks.

"Alright…. Brook, I need you to do something!" Luffy states.

"I thought as much! We're all in position to help you!" Nami's voice announces from afar. We all snap our heads to her voice and see her standing at the top of the ruins of the bridge, Clima-Tact over her shoulder and a look of confidence plastered on her dirty face.

"...Don't tell me these guys didn't even think of running..!" some old guy yelps. "From the moment Oars stood back up… They've been preparing a counter attack?!"

I've got nothing to do but laugh at the situation.

"Just watch." Luffy proclaims, determined expression back on his face.

"Aight!" I wheeze, struggling to my feet while my knees are barely better than jello, and motioning for the crowd to part. "Clear out, you're in the way!"

"You got it!" the guy who was moving me shouts, immediately booking it.

“If you say so!” Lola hollers, following in his wake.

I make it two steps before Robin is right there, catching me as I trip over a jagged chunk of stone. I let out a relieved laugh, clutching onto her arms with a wide smile. “Thanks for the save, Robin!”

She smiles fondly down at me. “Anytime, Detective.”

“Alright, are you ready, Ed?” Brook calls, Luffy already over one shoulder.

“Yeah, let’s go,” I reply, letting go of Robin so he can grab me. “Run us up that tower, this’ll be easy.”

Robin crosses her arms and feet are popping out of the stonework all the way up the mast mansion, and then we’re moving. Brook leaps up the buildings in great strides, not pausing for a second when it calls Oars’ attention to us.

He’s thankfully waylaid by Nami’s activities, the rain she summons soaking him before a huge plume of cold air is exploding from somewhere below us, freezing Oars’ lower body solid. There’s a resounding clang as the thick chain attached to the huge wheel is kicked over and across Oars’ upper chest by Sanji.

We make it to the top of the mast.

“Alright Ed, throw me! And throw me hard!” Luffy demands.

“As you command!” I reply, hoisting him into my arms and using what little space we have up here to start spinning to get momentum. “On your mark!” I shout, throwing him with everything I have and collapsing to my knees the minute he’s off.

“Ed, are you ok?!” Brook yelps, rushing to help me.

“Shhh — I gotta concentrate!” I grit out, the heels of my palms pressed snugly into my temples as I fight to maintain my control over Luffy’s gravity.

“ZORO! HIT HIM IN THE STOMACH!” Chopper shouts from somewhere.

There’s an almighty roar as Zoro does just that. There’s more sounds of the chain moving but I have to squeeze my eyes shut as the pressure on my head doubles.

“EEEEEED!” Luffy screams. “NOW!”

I wretch his gravity down with as much force as is practically possible.

The ensuing thump of the attack hitting, and clear sound of Oars’ spine snapping are music to my ears as I slump down over. “S’it over?” I groan, facedown on the roof.

“Well he’s not moving,” Brook responds, sitting down next to me.

There’s a moment of silence and I turn my face so my cheek is the only thing digging into the grit. “You ok?” I mumble, reach out and fumbling till I catch one one of his bony fingers.

“...What could this shivering sensation be..?” he murmurs.

“Gas?” I offer. He laughs.

“OOOOI! You gotta get your shadows back quick!” Usopp’s voice screams through the air.

I blink once. Twice. “Something I gotta do!” I suddenly shout, shooting up and groaning when that taxes muscles I didn’t even know I had.

“What?” Brook asks, grabbing my shoulder when I pitch forward.

“Moria! We gotta stop him before he eats all the fucking shadows!” I yelp, scrambling for the edge of the tower before stopping. I’m not gonna be able to catch myself with my powers, no chance in hell.

“Ed, I think you’ve done more than enough. If you keep going like this, the damage might be of the permanent sort,” Brook says, using his grip on me to pull me back.

“The sun is coming up, we don’t have time for me to slack off!” I shout.

“Do you even have enough energy to land an attack?” he asks, grabbing both of my shoulders and forcefully turning myself to him.

I can tell my expression doesn’t convince him I can, because I honestly think he’s right. But…

“Brook, if I can’t help now, what was the point in getting up just now?” I ask, brow furrowing and eyes imploring. “You could have gotten Luffy up here and thrown him by yourself, so why did I wake up to do it?”

“You’ve done what you can,” he answers. “Your crew can take care of the rest, you just have to trust them.”

I feel my expression crumple. I can hear people screaming below us and Moria’s mad laugh echoing in a multi-tone shriek. “But I want to help,” I say, voice cracking.

“You already have. And you’ll do it again, but right now that’s everyone else’s job,” Brook states. “You’re quite the capable fighter, Ed, but even you have limiTS OH MY GOD—”

The mast mansion is abruptly demolished. With us still on top of it. Me and Brook both scream, grabbing onto each other as it tips sideways and begins crashing to the ground.

“THIS IS WHY I CAN’T TAKE A DAY OFF!” I shout.

“OK I SEE YOUR POINT NOW!” Brook shrieks. “HOLD ON TIGHT, I’LL JUMP US TO SAFETY!”

I catch sight of Moria, giant and bloated with all the shadows he’s presumably absorbed. We’re at the highest point in Thriller Bark right now. The sun is breaking through the thin fog cover from the very edge of the Florian Triangle, catching in my eyes and across my face.

When I look down I can see my crew, standing against Moria with Luffy right in the front. He’s crouched and emitting that tell-tale smoke from gear 2, and I can’t see his expression from here, but I know the look on his face all the same.

“Ok,” I whisper, voice getting lost in the wind. “OK! Luffy can handle this one, get us to safety!”

“Really?” Brook asks, staring at me incredulously. “I thought that would take way more convincing!”

“I’m determined, not suicidal!” I bark, grabbing tight to his bony shoulders. “Now jump, you damn dog treat!”

Brook jumps. He leaps off the side of the mansion the fight isn’t on, so I lose sight of Moria as he and Luffy start fighting. We sail through the air, down down down until we’re crashing through tree cover and landing amongst roots.

Brook somehow, with his bony ass body and weird ‘basically can fly’ lightness, manages to soften our fall to the point it only really shocks my knees when we land.

I break away immediately, dropping my hold on him to sprint through the trees back towards the courtyard we’ve been throwing down in. Branches whip against my face and I stumble over loose dirt and stray rocks, desperate and single minded in my mission

I break through the tree line just as the mast mansion finishes its descent, squashing Moria like a bug. Shadows explode out from below it, and the sun finally makes it over the fog onto the ship fully.

Half of my friends’ heads burst into flames as the light hits; Robin, Franky, Sanji and Zoro all stand as unflinchingly as one can when their head is disintegrating. I race across the battlefield, watching with a wide grin as their shadows dart back to their bodies and they start repairing themselves.

“Looks like I’m alive,” Zoro says with a smirk.

“I thought I was going to heaven for a moment,” Robin muses.

“I’d gladly go to heaven if you were there,” Sanji sighs.

“I think I can tick ‘setting my head on fire’ off my bucket list now,” Franky says cheerfully.

I barrel right into the four of them in an absolute tackle of a hug. “You sons of bitches,” I curse, holding them tight as we stumble back a step and Zoro nearly collapses. “One plan to go smoothly was too much to ask, wasn’t it?”

Robin chuckles and passes a hand over my hair. “I suppose it is. Let’s hope for better next time.”

“This has been one long terrible ghost ride, and I am so glad it’s over,” Sanji groans, reaching around Zoro to pat me on the back.

“I don’t even like roller coasters,” I mutter, dropping down onto the ground beside where Luffy’s unconscious body is resting. “Or horror movies. Wait — this trip sucked, what the hell?”

“Anyone got a cola?” Franky moans, falling over onto another piece of stone near me. “I have been tossed around like a football more in the past several hours than ever before in my life.”

“Felt,” I say empathetically. “Heard, understood, and *felt.”* I think my arms are going numb, so that isn’t great.

I hunch in on myself, said arms crossed and over my shoulders as I take a second to decompress while my crew chats around me. Through the exhaustion the pain has become fairly secondary, my shoulders still sting something awful, and all the little bits of damage I’ve been picking up along the way are achy, but I’m mostly just tired.

Alright tired is an incredibly mild word for it, I’m conscious on pure fucking willpower and what I’m gonna attribute to that ibuprofen I downed what feels like years ago. I’m a couple violent shocks away from the lights up there going the fuck out.

I think the Victim’s Association comes over and thanks us at some point, but I focus on massaging the base of my neck and picking flecks of dried blood out of my hair.

Franky suddenly lurches upright beside me. “OH MY GOD I ALMOST FORGOT!”

I yelp and straighten up so fast my spine cracks. “Holy shit, *what?”* I whine, rubbing my back. Uuuuugh getting up that fast hurt my knees, and my head is doing the fwoooosh thing it does when you have low iron.

“There was a guy! When Oars threw me, there was this fucking guy!” he shouts. “There’s another Warlord on the island!”

Everything abruptly goes cold. “What?” I whisper.

No. No way. I didn’t forget the Warlord. I did not forget the fucking *WARLORD. AGAIN. NO **FUCKING WAY.***

“I see,” a man’s voice drawls, staticky and compressed through a Transponder call. “Seems my bad feeling was right.”

“So it seems,” a soft voice responds.

My head slowly turns to the mast mansion, my friends’ voices fluxing in and out around me. There at the top, Bartholomew Kuma sits perched with a Transponder Snail poised in one hand, and a bible balanced on his lap.

“Guys,” I say calmly. “Listen to me very carefully.”

All of their eyes turn to me. The guy on the Transponder call is blabbering away about something or other. “Ed, how fucked are we?” Nami hisses harshly.

“Contingency seven. Contingency *fucking seven,”* I enunciate.

All of them acutely inhale.

“Ed—” Usopp starts in a protesting tone.

“No,” I interrupt sharply. “You heard me. Contingency seven.”

“You know how I feel about contingency seven,” Zoro growls with a deep glare. “Come up with a new plan.”

“Zoro,” I snap. *“Shut the fuck up.”* Zoro’s mouth shuts with a click. “Luffy is unconscious, so who is in charge? Contingency. Number. *Seven.”*

There’s a second of silence as Kuma’s snail call ends and he stands up.

“Plan ‘stand down, shut up, and leave it to Ed’ is a go then?” Nami asks, voice shaking and eyes darting up to Kuma in complete terror.

“Er — this guy evaporated a girl. Like… *evaporated,”* Franky says slowly. “Are you sure about this?”

Kuma takes off his glove.

“This man’s Devil Fruit is so fucking jailbroken he could take our crew out in under a minute,” I admit. Usopp chokes on air. “Just, uh… let’s all use our brains, yes?”

Kuma disappears from atop the mast mansion and basically fucking teleports to the middle of the crowd, sending people flying before disappearing again.

“E. D. Domino, the Detective of the Damned. Let’s start with you…” his voice says quietly from behind us.

I spin around and stare up at him, having to crane my neck all the way up because of the fucking size of him. One look at his creepy blank eyes and I’m all but resigned.

“Right,” I mutter, sudden realizing the ‘leave it to Ed’ part of this plan is going to be a little hard when I’m either A) unconscious because I’m definitely about to pass out, or B) dead because this guy is gonna fucking kill me. “Shit.”

“You all have pretty good reputations,” Kuma says, voice monotone. “I heard Strawhat Luffy had gathered a number of skilled crew members. You guys are causing a lot of trouble, it’s not just the Captain that’s getting noticed now.”

“Ed,” Zoro says with a warning edge.

“We’re pretty loud and annoying, truth be told,” I say with a shaky smile, holding my hand up at Zoro. “I’ll probably just keep getting worse, too.”

“A dangerous thing to admit,” he says softly.

“Dangerous times,” I retort just as softly.

“Ed!” Zoro says louder. I keep ignoring him.

Kuma tilts his head. “You’re the one they say killed Spandam, is that true?”

“He hurt my friend,” I say firmly. “You wouldn’t kill to protect someone you care about?”

“Is that a yes?” he asks blankly.

“ED!” Zoro roars, taking a step towards us.

I nod my head. Kuma hums lowly. His hand thrusts forward and I couldn’t dodge if I wanted to.

Chapter End Notes

Teehee :) I really love this chapter.

What if I nerded out about the lyrical implications and connotations of Johnny Boy being about a middle aged man trying to kill himself and the world trying to stop him and Ed deciding to not destroy themself trying to help only to immediately go back on that when a greater threat presents itself? Huh?? What then??? What if I draw the parallels of this song with both Zoro and Luffy individually in addition to Ed???? Huh????? What would you do about that??????

Also what if I was listening to this on loop and had to pause and think "is this song abut a married man falling into a depression because he's queer and then trying to off himself?" to the point where I had to go and fucking look it up only to find out Tyler Joseph wrote it to encourage his dad after he got fired. So maybe not that one. But like also listen to it with that context it makes sense I swear.

Chapter 94: Chapter Ninety Four: Let Me Steal This Moment From You Now

Chapter Summary

Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God) - Kate Bush

“Oh,” I croak, throat dry and rough.

Chapter Notes

Buckle — and I cannot stress this enough — *THE FUCK* up.

Hope everyone who could (legally) blaze it yesterday on the day of our lord, the palindrome 4/20, did so with the utmost fervor because I could not.

I'M DONE CLASSES YOU SONS OF BITCHES I'M A FREE FUCKING AGENT! Until September. But I might actually fucking get something done now! Also the amount of freedom I suddenly have is crushing me. I need to relearn how to cope without the constant fear of a deadline xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I hear voices first. I don’t know what they’re saying, but I know it’s people I care about.

I’m in a considerable amount of pain, but not nearly as much as I expected to be as my memory slowly catches up to my body. I blink sluggishly and hazily at the stonework pressed close to my face. I assumed he had hit me with the air pressure cannon thing, but it certainly doesn’t feel like that. It also doesn’t particularly feel like I’m halfway across the world, so I guess that’s something.

I’m shocked out of contemplation but a throat tearing scream. I jolt upwards and start towards the voice before I even register who it was. I’m on my feet and halfway there when I freeze, realizing what I just woke to.

Zoro is on his back, bloody and panting, and Kuma is standing just in front of a huge red paw-shaped bubble.

“Oh,” I croak, throat dry and rough.

Kuma’s head tilts from looking at Zoro to regard me. “E. D. Domino,” he says, sounding the barest bit surprised. “You’re awake.”

Zoro’s eyes shoot open and he immediately starts trying to scramble to his feet. “Ed, don’t you dare,” he grits out.

“Don’t I dare, what?” I shoot, eyes darting around at the scene and just how fucking rough he looks.

“Don’t try and stop me, I’ll knock you out just like the cook,” he threatens.

I let my eyes drift off him to take stock of where all my crewmates are strewn. “You knocked out Sanji..?”

“The swordsman is offering his head in exchange for your Captain’s,” Kuma explains, seemingly more aware than Zoro that my ass just woke and would not have known that little detail. “He has agreed to take on all of his pain in exchange for you and your crew’s freedom.”

My eyes snap back to Zoro. He stares at me unflinchingly. “Do you have something to say for yourself?” I say lowly.

“I don’t want to hear anything about a sacrifice play from you,” he growls.

I lift my arm and point one single dramatic finger at him. “This is me, coming at you like a feral raccoon,” I announce.

Zoro blinks at me. Kuma blinks at me. I blink at both of them.

"Ed, fucking *what?"* Zoro groans, rubbing a hand down his face and smearing blood everywhere.

"'If you ever stop striving for your goals or do something to sabotage yourself,'" I quote. "That was my promise. This looks an awful lot like sabotage."

"There's no other option, Ed," he hisses. "What, you think I'll let *you* do it?"

"Your promise," I say imperiously, "was to stop me if I stopped trying to be better than you. So yes, I think I'm going to one-up you on the sacrifice play."

Zoro growls. "You—"

"As First Mate, I order you to stand down," I state, voice hard and unwavering.

"Excuse me?!" he squawks.

"As First Mate it's my *job* to shoulder any burden my Captain can't. So let me do the job you decided I deserved to have," I demand. "You look a stiff breeze away from meeting the devil, and I'm pretty sure I've got the constitution of a bull on steroids. Between the two of us, who do you think could body this better right now?"

"You have passed out so many times since we got here you could fill the comatose ward of a hospital!" Zoro shouts.

Kuma watches our exchange silently.

“And?” I leer. “You look like a butcher's discount meat of the day! Neither of us are exactly prime cuts right now!”

“I’m not taking that from someone who was *literally skewered!”* he squawks.

I shift my attention to Kuma. “So, is that a fair trade? Yeah, he’s going to be the world’s greatest swordsman one day, but I’m the First Mate of the future King of the Pirates. I killed a high level government official. I stole a Devil Fruit from right under a CP agent’s nose. I know things people at the top would *kill* to keep quiet. Does my head weigh enough?”

“Ed! You son of a bitch, stop goading him!” Zoro barks.

I jerk my chin up at him. “Hah? I’ll hear nothing about goading from you, you slashed up toad! This is happening with or without your approval!”

“Well you can’t do it yourself!” he yells petulantly.

“What, you want to split Luffy’s pain like a cake at a birthday party for twins?” I ask sarcastically.

“If you won’t let me do it myself and that’s what it takes, then yes,” Zoro snaps.

I pause for a second. To be honest I wasn’t super jazzed by the idea of taking all of Luffy’s pain, he is a reckless motherfucker, but I was 100% down for that shit. But…

“Two heads are better than one,” I admit.

But both turn to Kuma, who is still watching us blankly.

“Would you accept that?” Zoro asks in a demanding tone.

Kuma is silent for a second longer. “I will accept that. Though I must ask the same as I did before, how will dying for Strawhat satisfy your ambitions?”

“Luffy is *everything,”* I say adamantly. “He’s the centre of my universe. He’s going to be King of the Pirates one day.” Then I shrug and twist my ring around my finger. “Plus I married the motherfucker. I think dying for him was kinda written into the contract. Admittedly I liked the challenge of *living* for him better, but compromise is the spice of life or whatever.”

They both regard me silently.

“I’m pretty sure we left the ‘death do us part’ thing out of your vows, so there’s that,” Zoro mutters quietly. “You really are a sucker for martyrdom though, huh?”

“Rather unfortunately, I will always be what I am,” I say simply. “The self worth thing has gotten better, but I think I’m always gonna hold our Captain in higher regard than myself.”

“Do you have any more requests or addendums?” Kuma asks, a pawed hand splitting the red bubble into two equal parts.

“Let me decide the location,” Zoro implores, eyes drifting to where Sanji is sprawled out as he slowly crouches and places his swords on the ground.

“I’ve got one;” I announce. “We’re having a party to celebrate beating Moria after this. Stay and have a drink with us.”

Zoro chokes. Kuma stares. I stare back.

“If that is your final request, should you survive, I will have a drink with you.”

Oh my god I didn’t think that would work.

Zoro smacks himself on the forehead.

_____

Zoro’s location of choice is just outside the ruins.

We stand side by side in front of our two matching bubbles, and I’m hoping Zoro is feeling the same impending doom from this as I am but is just good at hiding it. Kuma is behind us, just observing.

“You know, when we met Luffy’s dad in Loguetown I told him I loved his cause, then yelled ‘FUCK THE SYSTEM!’ right in front of Smoker,” I say, apropos of nothing.

Zoro shoots me a side-eye. “Ok — First, good job. Second, why the fuck are you telling me that *now?”*

I shrug. “Nervous,” I admit. “Thought it was funny, I was trying to lighten the mood. Do you think that’s why Smoker hates me so much?”

“It is funny,” Zoro sighs. “And it’s absolutely why he hates you. Mood doesn’t need lightning, though. I’m cheerful as fuck about this, can’t you tell?”

I tap him on the shoulder instead of socking him. Better not to add any more pain on top of the absolute hell we’re about to experience.

“On the count of three?” he prompts.

I turn to him for a second. “Hey.” He hums. “Don’t stop laughing, yeah?” He blinks at me. I stare back. “Just… don’t let this stop you from being silly.”

“Why would I do that?” Zoro asks, brow furrowed.

I shrug, a little helpless. Post-timeskip serious Zoro is still funny, but he isn’t silly Zoro. It starts after this, doesn’t it? “I like you goofy.”

He gives me a little nod.

“It’s time,” Kuma announces.

We both tense up.

“Count of three, you said?” I murmur, reaching out to squeeze his fingers.

“Count of three,” Zoro confirms.

“On three or after three?” I question.

“After three. Like one, two, three, go,” he decides.

I nod. “Ok. One.”

Zoro’s fingers tighten on mine. “Two.”

“Three,” we say together.

We plunge into our respective bubbles.

_____

I notice how warm it is first. I can feel sunbeams gently warming the skin of my face and my closed eyes. There’s the soft drone of speaking from somewhere near me, and sounds like nature even more distant than that.

The speaking stops for a second and the light dims. Even the sounds of nature stop. I furrow my brow as this goes on for a prolonged minute. Then they all start again in the same moment. It was like a cloud passed in front of the sun and everything paused with it.

“—ters of state that really should be — are you even listening?”

My eyes snap open. “Yes,” I respond completely automatically before I even understand what’s going on.

I blink twice at my surroundings. I’m in some kind of hallway, it almost looks like a church or an incredibly old school, with tall glassless lancet windows letting in an abundance of light from the blue sky. Everything is made of the same pale stone, and I feel my eyes drift to the high, rib vaulted white ceilings.

“Unbelievable,” whoever was talking scoffs.

I jump and dart my eyes to them. I blink twice more when I can’t make out any distinguishing features, then rub at my eyes with my hands to see if that makes a difference. When neither changes anything about the hazy indistinct quality of the person, I frown.

“Are you still zoning out?” the person demands. I jolt as they speak.

“Er — no?” I say slowly, eyes drifting back to the window lined wall.

Through it I can see some kind of courtyard, green grasses and a pathway to a tiered fountain. Beyond the walls that enclose the courtyard I can see a tall tower, a rose window planted just below what seems to be a large bell.

“Your Majesty!” the person says sharply, snapping fingers in my face.

“Sorry!” I yelp, giving them my full attention despite them being quite hard to focus on.

They heave a heavy sigh. “You’ve been like this ever since you got back. I blame that ridiculous boy, filling your head up with clouds.”

I frown again. “The only thing filling up my head is my brain, thank you very much,” I say primly.

Even though I can’t see them, I know their eyes roll. A breeze blows in from the courtyard and sends long green hair tumbling into my face. I squint and flip it back over my shoulder, and when I reopen my eyes, it’s dark.

I blink twice. The person is gone — the hallway empty and the gothic architecture, which had seemed so soft and lovely in the afternoon light, is now casting deep shadows across the dusty ground. Outside the sounds of wind and birds have vanished, and the blue sky is a dull swirl of clouds over a blanket of more clouds.

“What..?” I mutter, taking a step towards the windows. When I move I feel something drag with me, and when I glance back I can see I’m wearing some kind of yellow cape thing. I look down and glance over my clothing.

The cape is draped over my right shoulder, threaded and tied to a pauldron on my left. Underneath it is a white shirt with a trail of buttons that disappear into my waistband and puffy sleeves, yellow fabric peeking through slits near the cuffs. I take another step and frown at the tight black pants, tucked into brown leather boots that click when I continue.

I lean out the window, over the maybe two foot solid part of the wall, and frown harder. The courtyard is full of leaves and the fountain is empty, which is strange because it was clean and the water was running just a second ago.

I turn back to the hallway and a loud sound like a beep crashes through the air. I stumble back and nearly fall out of the window. A second one sounds, then a third, and then it's just droning in a steady beat.

"Your Majesty!" the person from before says loudly. Between one blink and the next, they're right back in front of me and everything is light again.

I blink twice and grab onto the ledge of the window. The loud beeping continues. "What is that?" I ask breathlessly.

The person tilts their head. "What's what?"

"The beeping," I respond, waving my hand in the air.

They stare at me for a long second. "That's the bell, your Majesty. Are… are you feeling ok?"

A bell? I turn back around and gaze out and up at the tower I saw before. Sure enough, the bell is swinging gently back and forth in time with the sound.

"Where am I?" I whisper.

"You don't know?" they ask.

I go to run my hands through my hair, but instead I knock a weight off my head I hadn't even noticed. It hits the ground with a heavy thunk, the person crying out in shock.

I stare at the heavy golden crown in silence for a second.

The person lunges forward and plucks it off the floor, dusting it off and frantically checking it over for damages. "Your Majesty," they scold, "you have to be more careful! At this rate we'll have to switch you back to the tiara!"

"The tiara," I repeat numbly.

Their hands linger on the polished gold and carved lines, thumb hovering over the central gem set in the middle. Then they scoff and place the crown back on my head. "I knew it. That boy of yours was a bad influence, you should have never stayed away for so long. Better yet, never gone at all."

"He isn't a bad influence," I snap with a tongue not my own. I blink twice. My mouth continues to move on its own. "He saved us and you know it."

The person is silent for a beat. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" my mouth demands. "You have to know I couldn't have done it by myself."

"Not that part," they say, voice equal parts sour and condescending. "That you and him have made us ***safe."***

With sudden clarity I realize this is the same person from my earlier dream.

My throat clenches and my stomach goes cold. "What do you mean?" I croak. The bell is still droning, the sound making my ears feel numb. "Why is it still going? What does that mean?" I ask, breath beginning to feel short.

They shake their head with a sound of disbelief. "You forgot? Disgraceful." They point out the window to the tower. "That means an enemy is approaching."

I jolt forward. "What?" I say breathlessly. "Why are we just standing here, then?!"

"You've already lost," they say, condescension and mocking soaking their voice. "We've already done this. You already know how it ends."

"Ends?" I breathe out.

My mouth takes over again. "No, no end. He'll save us. He'll come and save me."

"You know he won't," they hiss. "He will arrive far too late, and you will still die."

Everything stops. I blink twice. The hallway is dark again. The person is gone. The bell continues to toll.

"Go," my mouth demands.

"What?" I whisper.

***"Go,"** it says adamantly.*

"They said we'll die," I repeat.

“So what,” my mouth hisses harshly.

“What’s the point, then?” I breathe.

“Does everything you do suddenly not matter because you’ll die one day?” it snaps. “They said he was coming, if nothing else go buy him some fucking time!”

“We’re already dying,” I point out, dropping to my knees and grabbing onto the shaft of the polearm skewered through my stomach.

“Oh,” my mouth says.

“Oh,” I agree.

My right eye is crusted shut with blood. Water is soaking through my boots and pants. I don’t know when the hallway flooded.

I can hear someone down the hall around the corner, sprinting and splashing water. They’re yelling my name in a desperate voice.

“Told you he’d come,” my mouth slurs, tongue heavy and sluggish.

“Yeah, you did,” I agree. I’m so tired.

“Do you want to meet him?” my mouth asks.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” I admit.

My mouth hums. "Ok. You'll give him a hug for me though, won't you?"

"Sure," I mumble.

He comes around the corner. I pitch backwards into the water.

———

Everything hurts. Like — a lot.

A lot a lot.

I'm facedown on the ground, in complete agony, and absolutely plastered in blood. I breath shallowly, blinking lazily and trying to flip myself over. It's not really working. There's rocks digging into uncomfortable places in quite uncomfortable ways, and I would rather like to be unconscious right now.

I suddenly realize someone is talking.

"Why the fuck is there so much blood?!" Sanji screams. "Are you still alive?! Where did that guy go?! What the fuck happened..?!"

I manage to turn my head. I think I'm half buried under something, but I can see over where Sanji is hovering panicked hands over Zoro, who is standing upright with his arms crossed looking as bad as I feel.

"N — Nothing happened…" he rasps.

I stare for a second. Then I snort. The snort quickly turns to chuckles, then full on laughter. Sanji's head snaps to me and I can see Zoro's eyes move to look, though his head doesn't.

"Ed?! Sanji cries. "What did you two *do?!"*

I just keep laughing, even though it makes me feel like I'm on fire. "Z — Zoro," I wheeze out. He hums roughly in response. "That *cannot* be comfortable on the legs!" I cackle.

He stares at me unblinkingly for a moment. Then he snorts. Then we're both laughing, trying not to pass out or cry from pain in the middle of this blood-soaked clearing while Sanji stares at us in horror.

"You son of a bitch," Zoro curses, chest rattling with each laugh. "Shut the fuck up."

"Whatever you say, Roronoa Zoro," I laugh. "Whatever you say."

_____

You're not gonna fucking belive this, but I definitely wake up because I smell food.

My eyes fly open, probably the only part of my body that doesn't protest movement, and dart to the side. There's a plate of crab near me. So close I could grab it if I could move my hands.

Someone reaches for the plate.

"HANDS OFF!" I shout as loud as I can. It makes my throat HUUUUUURT and sends me into a coughing fit, but the guy jumps back with a high pitched scream so Imma just go ahead and count that as a win.

“ED!” Chopper screams in my ear, tears running down his face as he gets real close to mine. “WHY ARE YOU ALREADY AWAKE?!”

“I was right,” I groan, “constitution of a bull on steroids.”

Chopper starts rattling off medical jargon that would send my head spinning if I could hear fucking any of it, but as it is I’m barely getting half the words.

Luffy comes bounding over into my view, face shoving in close to mine with a bright beaming smile. “Morning, Ed! How do you feel?”

“Like I want that fucking plate of crab inside my body in the next ten seconds or this building will *not* exist after them,” I say without hesitation. Luffy glances over at the plate and snatches it, gently but swiftly propping me up, and unceremoniously shoves its contents into my mouth.

It’s damn good crab. I groan, resting my head on Luffy’s arm where he’s helping hold me up, and ascend to heaven. “That’s the good shit,” I mumble, eyes slipping closed.

“Aw man, don’t go back to sleep yet,” Luffy whines.

I peek my eyes back open. “Fine,” I sigh. “Now I’m feeling like I need a hug, please.”

He grins and tugs me into an all encompassing embrace, arms wound soft but securely around me. I sigh again, forcing my own arms to come up and hold him back, clutching at his shirt with one hand and the other smoothing up his neck and running along the chain that holds his wedding band.

Luffy pulls back just a bit and grabs my face with both hands. “You gonna stop getting your ass beat any time soon?”

I smile and lean into his palms. “Honestly? Probably not.”

It’s his turn to sigh. “Thought so.” Then he turns to look over his shoulder. “Oh, by the way, there’s a dude here for you.”

I blink a few times. “A dude?”

“The dude, “ Luffy corrects. “The Warlord paw guy. He’s just kinda been sitting silently in the corner since the fight ended? It’s been like a day. I wonder if he poops? Anyway, he said you asked him to stay for a drink, so we’ve just been leaving him alone.”

I blink for a second before gaping, leaning up to look over Luffy’s shoulder. Sure as shit, Bartholomew motherfucking Kuma is just sat in the fucking corner of the half ruined mast mansion, ignoring the party and staring over at us.

Mouth still wide open in shock, I beckon him over with a hand wave. As he stands and people start crying out in shock, I turn back to Luffy. “Where is — oh wait.” I catch sight of Zoro, laid out in a bed beside mine and wrapped up like a mummy. I reach over and poke him. “Zoro, hey, wake up,” I demand.

“Ed!” Chopper shrieks. “Don’t do that! His body still needs time to heal!”

“He can go back to sleep later. ZORO! WAKEY WAKEY, DRINKS AND SAKE!” I shout right in his ear, hanging onto Luffy’s shoulder so I don’t just fall and stay down.

“Will that work?” Luffy asks.

“Wha?” Zoro slurs, cracking one eye open.

“Good morning starshine, the earth says hello!” I croon, giving him a bright smile.

“You’ve said that one before,” he groans, squinting and scowling.

I pause. “Oh. Yeah, I have. Anyway, you gotta take a shot, then you can go back to sleep.”

Zoro heaves a long sigh, face set in a grimace. “Yeah. Fine, sure. Why?”

“Sorry for making you wait,” I apologize as Kuma takes a seat at the foot of both of our beds.

Zoro starts, jerking halfway up before collapsing back down with a groan. “Oh my god you were serious? What the fuck, Ed.”

“Zoro, don’t be rude,” I say pleasantly. “Kuma, do you have a drink of choice?”

“Whatever you decide,” he says in a monotone.

I hum lightly. “Luffy darling, is there a bottle of my schnapps handy?”

Luffy blinks slowly at me before reaching past me and picking up a bottle, apparently stashed behind the bed I’m in at the base of the mattress. He hands it to me with a completely straight face.

“Luffy! I told you not to put that there!” Chopper screeches shrilly.

“Told you having it nearby would make Ed wake up faster. My crab idea worked, too,” Luffy says matter-of-factly. I love him so much.

“Neither of you should even be drinking!” Chopper says shrilly.

I wave him off, popping the cork out of the bottle and pouring out three shots into glasses Luffy passes me as well. “One drink won’t be what kills us, promise.”

I pass one glass to Kuma, who’s giant fucking gloved hand dwarfs the damn thing, and hold out Zoro’s as he slowly makes his way into a seating position. “How the fuck do you seem so fine right now?” he mutters.

“Oh I’m in absolute agony,” I reply, lifting my shot and holding it out. “To not kicking the fucking bucket!”

Kuma delicately clinks his glass against mine and Zoro’s, waiting patiently for Zoro’s shaking hand to clumsily bump his into mine, and then we all throw them back.

“Whoo, that’s that,” I cheer. “Absolutely lovely to meet you, let’s not do it again for a very long time.”

“Seconded,” Zoro wheezes, flopping back down onto the bed and immediately passing back out.

Kuma places his glass on the ground and stares at me for a moment. “You as well,” he finally says. He turns to nod at Luffy then stands to his feet, plucks a glove off, touches his chest, and vanishes.

We stare where he once stood for a long second.

“Interesting guy,” I settle on.

“Yeah,” Luffy agrees. There’s another pause. “So, you want more crab?”

“Absolutely the fuck I do.”

Chapter End Notes

And this concludes our stargirl interlude, back to our regularly scheduled program.

It’s everybody’s favourite part of every saga; Ed having Strange and Prophetic Dreams of an Odd Sort™ when they get inevitably fucked to the point of incomprehension. We love our fucked up and foolish king ❤️ Ed has that thing where you suddenly learn deep lore about your dad, like he once spent 6 hours in a limo with Aerosmith or something, but like... about themself.

I was really up in arms for a long time about whether or not I wanted to go ahead with this plot point — especially since a few of you seemed so attached to Zoro’s First Mate title way back when. Then I remembered it’s my fic that I’m writing because I want to and I don’t actually have to care if it’s not the most audience pleasing option I had. So Ed can help shoulder a burden and Zoro can learn to lean a little more on his pals.

Mostly I was worried it would come out clunky like Ed was stealing the spotlight and negating a big part of Zoro’s character, but honestly I’m pretty happy with how it turned out. Lmao that's why the title is so funny to me, because yeah you stupid bitch you go steal that shit. Slay.

Roronoa “I’ll respect your authority over me because despite your flaws I trust you implicitly” Zoro vs E. D. “I will pull rank for TWO (2) THINGS only, and one of them is getting me things from across the room because I don’t want to get up” Domino fight to the death cage match four rounds in the ring no survivors.

And what if I told you there was Ace content next chapter, huh? Would that scare you? It sure has been a while since we checked in with hm.

Oh. And. Art.

Chapter 95: Chapter Ninety Five: In Any Lifetime

Chapter Summary

Francesca - Hozier

“Could Ace make toast?” he repeats. I drop my chicken onto the plate. “Are you ok?”

Chapter Notes

Happy almost one year! Can you believe we're almost at 100 chapters? Fucken crazy. Fair waring; I get emotional as FUCK in the end notes so. Be warned.

Also idk if anyone remembers or cares about the college AU I teased in like... October, but I've been working on that a bunch. When I first mentioned it I was like 'gee, I'll post about this once I do all the art for it, that should only be a few weeks, right?' No you stupid bitch it's been half a year. So yeah, I'm finally getting that damn thing done. I wanted to draw each Strawhat because I'm insane like that, and I'm down to the last one. On a totally unrelated note, does anyone know how to draw Jimbei and not make him look like an alien? Also not me having to REDO all the shit I had done because ART SCHOOL changed my ART STYLE. Who could have seen that one coming? But yeah, I'm hopeful to drop that with the next chapter on my Tumblr. Is it just character designs with a bunch of headcanons? Yeah. What of it?

Anyway onto the chapter. Dw, I'm sure nothing awful happens in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sooooo…” Luffy says, drawing the sounds out, “what’s with the whole,” he gestures to my everything, “thing?”

I give him a blank look. “Dollface, I’m only on my third plate of food, that is not enough for this conversation.”

I’m cross-legged on the bed with my plate balanced on my knee, and for once Luffy isn’t trying to steal anything off it. At some point while I was out someone had changed me out of my extremely damaged clothes, RIP fishnet shirt you were gone too soon, and into one of

those grandpa sweaters with the fun patterns and the softest pair of cargo pants I own. All of the copious amounts of shit I keep in my pockets is settled at the corner of the mattress.

“But Eeeeeeeed,” he whines, rolling around on my bed, “I wanna knooooooow!” He abruptly sits back up and scooches close with a wide eyed look. “Was this one of the congigences?”

“Contingency,” I sound out. “And in a way? I called for a contingency when Kuma first showed up.”

“Which one? Number six?” he questions.

“Number seven,” I correct.

“Contingency ‘shut up and let Ed cook?’” he asks, tilting his head.

“Contingency ‘shut up and let Ed cook,’” I confirm.

“So, did you cook?” he questions, scrutinizing the bandages on my everything.

I stare pointedly down at my wrapped arms and legs. “Uh. Yeah. Remember before we got Sanji and I tried to make breakfast? It was that kind of cooking.”

Luffy grimaces. “Ooooh. Burnt toast, got it.” I take another bite of the chicken I’ve been devouring. “Do you think Ace could make toast with his hands?” Luffy muses.

I freeze with the chicken halfway in my mouth. “Say again?” I say, slowly lowering it.

“Could Ace make toast?” he repeats. I drop my chicken onto the plate. “Are you ok?”

“I NEED A TRANSPONDER, STAT!” I holler into the room.

Anyone standing nearby jumps, and from the other side of the room, the rest of my crew seems to finally realize I’m awake.

“ED?! WHEN DID YOU WAKE UP?!” Usopp yells over, scrambling out of his seat at the table and nearly kicking Nami in the face as he crawls over it.

“NOT NOW USOPP, I NEED TO MAKE A CALL!” I yell, head on a swivel like someone will just have one handy.

Someone’s hand raises in the crowd. “We have one!”

My head snaps to them. “BRING IT OVER *NOW!”*

“No need to shout, really,” he mumbles, walking it over.

“I will disembowel you and use your intestines as rigging, *get a fucking move on!”* I growl.

He finally gets his ass in gear and sprints that last stretch, holding a goth looking snail (if there ever was such a thing) with a look of mild fear directed at me. “We found it in the rubble, we think it's a little damaged because there’s random bouts of static, but we've been using it to call to family and such so at the very least it's functional,” he explains.

“I don't give a fuck *gimme—”* I rush out, making grabbing hands and snatching it from him as soon as it’s in reach. I waste no time punching Ace’s number in even as my crew finally make their way over.

Sanji gives me a relieved smile. “Ed we were so worried, what one earth did you—”

“Shhhhhh!” I hiss, yanking my wallet out my pile of shit in the corner and tugging Ace’s vivre card out of where it’s shoved in the little place for your ID while the Transponder rings. I stare at the piece of paper, whole and unblemished.

“Sup baby, how’s your life?” Ace’s voice asks, the Transponder connecting with a click and a burst of static.

I stare at it in silence for a second, mouth agape and fingers pinched on the scrap of paper.

“...Ed?” he ventures, the snail’s eyebrow raising. “This is Ed, right? I didn’t just call a stranger baby?”

I burst into tears. Loud ones. My crew makes sounds of shock around me and Nami is grabbing me by the shoulder and checking me over with a bewildered look.

Luffy picks up the receiver. “Hi Ace! Ed is having a moment, they’ll be back in a second,” he says cheerfully.

“What? Hi Luffy. What? A *moment?”* Ace questions.

I shrug Nami off and hastily wipe my face off, not snatching the receiver from Luffy’s hands, just grabbing both and leaning right down into it. “Good lord I’m so fucking happy you’re alive!” I sob, collapsing onto Luffy.

“What?” Ace blurts, face going red and bewildered. “I’m happy you’re alive too? Are you ok?”

“I’m so glad you’re ok,” I whine again, pressing my cheek into Luffy’s arm while he looks at me with a slight furrow in his brow.

There's another burst of static before Ace answers. Cheap ass broken Transponder. "Fuck, has the news already reported on what happened on Banaro?"

My blood goes cold. "What?" I whisper. "WHAT HAPPENED ON BANARO?!" I shriek, jolting forward.

The snail's face scrunches. "No need to yell. I, uh, what did you say last time? Situation update babe; promise you won't lose your shit."

"Ace I am already losing my shit, *spit it out,"* I grit out, squeezing Luffy's hands onto the receiver.

"I fought Blackbead." My heart stops. "Only briefly," he quickly adds. "Me and Sabo were supposed to rendezvous on Banaro." *Of course they were what the fuck.* "I got there first, and uh… guess who was waiting in the bar?"

"And you fought him?" I wheeze out, nails pinching into Luffy's skin.

"A bit. What was I supposed to do? *Not* hit him as soon as I saw him?" Ace asks petulantly.

"Yes!" I yell. "That is exactly what you should have done!"

"Well, too late to change it now," Ace grumbles. There's another burst of static. "Anyway, things started looking… iffy, so I. Uh," he trails off.

"You? Uh?" I prompt. His words get lost in a buzz of static. "What? Ace, I couldn't hear you."

"I ran away!" he blurts.

Luffy gasps beside me. “You *never* run away!” He turns to give me a disbelieving glance then turns back to the snail. “I’ve never seen you run from a fight!”

“It’s embarrassing enough as it is!” he squawks, snail burning bright red. “Moving on! I’m staked out on a nearby island now, me and Sabo are regrouping here in a bit to make a better plan of action. The Marine activity out here is basically choking traffic, so he got a bit waylaid.”

“What islands are near Banaro?” I mumble to myself.

“I’ve got no idea what this place is called, something with an F,” Ace responds. I really wasn’t looking for an answer, but ok. “Either way, I’ve just got to wait them out until Sabo arrives. He’s smarter than me, so he’ll figure out what to do next.”

“Christ, this guy must be a genius for you to admit inferiority,” I whistle sarcastically.

“Why are we all making fun of me? I don’t deserve this,” he mutters, nose scrunching. It’s never going to not be weird watching a creature without a nose scrunch one.

“It’s because we love you oh so very much,” I sing, frowning and adjusting the snail when another bout of static escapes its mouth.

“Oh, um. Something else…” Ace starts, sounding trepidatious and reluctant. Me and Luffy exchange a side eye. That doesn’t bode well. “Blackbeard said a couple… things, while we were fighting.”

I tense up. “He does tend to do that,” I say stiffly.

What did that motherfucker say? What does that motherfucker *know?* What kind of motherfuckery is about to come out of Ace’s mouth?

“He was talking shit about his plan to become one of the Warlords of the Sea, all cocky like he had already gotten everything he wanted, and it was… a bit — how do I say this — *fucking awful?”* Ace says slowly. “At first it was all vague stuff about giving them an offer they couldn’t refuse, then it was giving them a person, then it was…”

“...It was?” I prompt at his silence, a slow creeping horror making my overtaxed nervous system twitch and sting.

“He said he was going to give them Luffy.” The sharp gasps from over my shoulder remind me that my crew is listening in. My hands clench tighter over Luffy’s on the receiver and we exchange a look. “I told him we were brothers and I wouldn’t give him the fucking chance, but he—” Ace cuts himself off again.

I bite my lip, face twisting up. “Spit it out, give me another reason to wish this asshole dead,” I blurt, knee bouncing furiously in anticipation and a less than healthy dose of fear.

“He asked if I would have a problem with him taking you too,” he says quietly.

My blood stops cold, ceasing circulation in my veins. The sounds of the party go silent in my ears.

“What?!” Luffy shouts, indignant and a little scared.

“Me?” I manage to choke out around the lead ball where my throat should be.

“He said he wasn’t even going to turn you in,” Ace says in a strangled tone. “He said he was going to keep you and squeeze every last drop of information out until you dropped. He was fucking *laughing.* Said he had to pay you back for his ear, called what you did to him a *present.”*

I drop Luffy’s hands and the receiver to press them over my mouth as my back bows.

Holy fucking mother of *shit*—

I fucked up so irrevocably bad with that *stupid fucking* ***bullet—***

I put myself directly in his fucking sights *goddamnit*—

Blackbeard. Fucking *Blackbeard.* Blackbeard who is potentially the BBEG of this story, only contested by the fucking *possibly immortal shadow leader of the government.* Blackbeard who was able to beat Ace in a fight. Blackbeard who could steal a Devil Fruit. Blackbeard who could permanently scar *Shanks,* a damn *Emperor.* Blackbeard, who Ace is still fucking *gunning for.*

"Ace," I whisper through my hands, "if I asked you, one more time, to cut and run — to leave this guy to someone else and just *let it be* — would… would you?"

There's a long moment of silence. Ace hesitates. Luffy leans forward, lip between his teeth. It feels like the whole room holds its breath.

Ace's response is drowned out by fucking static.

"One more time, our snail's connection is crappy," Luffy demands, eyebrows furrowed.

"...Ok," Ace says quietly.

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline. "Ok?" I parrot.

"Ok," he repeats.

Me and Luffy look at each other. We look at the snail. We look back at each other.

"HOLY SHIT!" I shout, jumping to my feet on the bed with a mile wide grin. "HOLY FUCK! OH MY GOD I DID IT!"

Luffy jumps up beside me and throws his arms up. "I am also happy about this! That's Ace running from a fight *twice* in the same call!"

"Don't say it like that!" Ace squawks.

I grab Luffy by the hands and we start jumping in a circle, squealing like little girls at a sleepover.

"Ed! You're gonna stomp on the Transponder!" Nami shrieks, diving between our legs to retrieve the poor thing as it spits bouts of static like a leaky faucet.

"More importantly, YOU'RE STILL INJURED!" Chopper screams, hooves waving frantically at us.

"Oh, right," I say with a blink. Then the pain of goofing off hits all at once. My vision goes blurry and I nearly fall backwards off the bed, Luffy having to catch me so I don't crack my skull open. I groan long and loud, back of my hand pressed dramatically to my forehead. "Oh how great mine suffering, doth consequences harken my soul in dastardly recompense! Ho — what yonder light beckons me thus from our earthly coil!" I wail, stopping when Luffy lowers me back to the bed with a frown. "Owie."

"What the actual hell did you just say?" Usopp questions, looking at me like I just left a bag of kittens hanging in a burning tree.

"You don't fuck with bastardized Shakepeare? I'm unappreciated in my time," I groan, drawing my knees up and crossing my arms over my stomach. I feel like I got bodied by a car again.

“Wait — you’re hurt? Why are you hurt?” Ace asks, the snail in Nami’s hands making a panicked face.

We all wince at once. “Oh. Haha, right,” Luffy laughs nervously. “We forgot to tell you.”

I make grabby hands at the Transponder from on my back. Nami slowly hands it back to me. “Ace I want you to make one guess who we just fought,” I mumble directly into the receiver, dropping the snail onto my chest.

“...What did you do,” he says slowly, more an accusation than a question.

“Well,” I start, “the good news is we have now made our way through fighting more than half of the Seven Warlords of the Sea in one way or another. The bad news is Zoro is in the lead with number of those fights participated in, with — I think — me and Luffy tied for second. I mean, if you count getting beat up fighting.” I pause for a second. “Actually, if you count the time Crocodile slammed me into those bars, I’m tied with Zoro.”

There’s a long silence from Ace and the snail.

“I feel great, though!” Luffy announces cheerfully.

“I’m sure the fuck you do,” I say pleasantly.

Ace remains unspeaking.

“...Ace? Buddy? You have an aneurysm over there?” I ask hesitantly.

“What Warlords, exactly?” he asks in a high pitched and strangled voice.

“Er — well Zoro fought Mihawk back in the East Blue, and Luffy beat up Crocodile as you remember. And uh — we’re on Gecko Moria’s ship right now,” I say slowly. “He was the only one we were fighting initially. Our new friend — is Brook still over there playing piano? That motherfucker didn’t even come over to say hi,” I complain, getting sidetracked to squint across the room at him.

“Ed. Stay on track, please. I think you’re killing the poor man,” Robin suggests, pointing past my head at the snail’s twitch face. That is… certainly an expression.

“Right. So, uh. We beat up Moria and all his goons — well Luffy took down Moria and Oars, even though I set off a *bomb in his damn stomach* — I’m not salty, I’m not. Anyway, as soon as we catch a fucking break from this fucking nightmare Bartolomew *fucking* Kuma comes pulling up late to the party with Starbucks and orders to wipe us all out,” I explain awkwardly.

“What’s Starbucks?” Luffy asks with a tilt of his head.

“Coffee,” I say offhandedly. “Anyway Kuma rocked all our shit — I think? I dunno, he knocked my ass out almost immediately. Then—” I cut myself off and suck my cheeks in. “...Stuff.”

“...Stuff?” Ace and Luffy repeat in unison.

I avert my eyes and purse my lips with as innocent a face as I can make. “Yup. Stuff. Anyway me and Zoro had a drink with the guy just a bit ago, he seems pretty chill. Aside from the… other stuff…”

“You’re telling me,” Ace starts, “that you sat down and *fucking drank* with a Warlord they call the *Tyrant,* after he *beat you and your whole crew up?”*

“Yeah that’s about the long and short of it,” I confirm flippantly. “Sounds a little looney when you say it like that, though.”

“IT’S LOONEY NO MATTER HOW YOU SPIN IT, DUMBASS!” Ace shrieks.

“Could someone get me some water? I’m parched,” I ask, ignoring him. Sanji lurches forward, then is absolutely sprinting away.

“DON’T IGNORE ME!” Ace hollers.

I groan into my hand. “Ace, dollface, *please.* You’re giving me a killer headache. I don’t know how much more pain meds we can pump me full of before I start developing an immunity or it just straight kills me instead.”

“Exactly how bad are you hurt?” he asks, his indignation turning into concern immediately.

“I mean…” I frown down at my hands, clenching and unclenching them. “I thought I would feel worse? I’m not gonna lie, yesterday was nothing short of agony from start to finish. Even my shoulders aren’t awful right now, and I literally had swords through them.”

“I’m sorry what?”

Ace’s words are drowned out by Chopper as he jumps onto the bed beside me and gives me a stern look. “Just because you’re not feeling it right now, you were in abysmal condition only a day ago. You and Zoro were both close to *dying,* with the amount of damage you both accumulated.”

Ace makes an upset noise and I glance over at where Zoro is still layed out unconscious in the other bed with a frown. “Then why is Zoro still out and I’m up?”

“My best guess is you or your body is putting off its reaction. Zoro’s is doing the smart thing and keeping him unconscious while he heals, he’ll probably be up and about and back to decent condition within the next few days. You on the other hand are feeling ok right now,

but you're definitely going to crash soon, and you're going to crash *hard,"* Chopper explains. "And when you do, you'll have no one to blame but yourself and I will gloat about being right."

"Damn, Chops, that's cold," I mumble, sitting up and rubbing my upper arm. "So it's like pain is weed and I just took a hit and am waiting for the high. Or would it be more accurate to say I'm already blazed and am waiting to come down?"

"What?" Chopper questions, face scrunching up.

"What?" Luffy parrots, tilting his head.

"Wait you guys have weed?" Ace asks.

I blink slowly at all of them. "No. No we do not."

"Actually, I think I do," Sanji says, appearing beside me with a tall glass of water and pressing it into my hands. His mouth turns down in thought as he looks off at the ceiling. "I had a stash on the Baratie I took so Zeff wouldn't find it. He was less chill with that than the cigarettes. I haven't smoked any since I left though, it's probably somewhere in the bottom of my bag."

"Well I know what we're doing when we get together next!" Ace says brightly.

"Dream blunt rotation, let's go," I laugh, pumping my fist. "We gotta get Trafalgar Law on this shit too, I *know* his ass partakes. Have you seen that motherfucker?"

"Who? Wait, isn't he that Supernova from the North?" Ace asks, the snail raising an eyebrow.

I nod. “I haven’t even seen his poster, I just know I’m right. Hey Zo — wait shit he’s still asleep. Hey when Zoro wakes up, remind me to bet him 12,000 berri that guy’s got eye bags like suitcases on his poster.”

“What the fuck are you saying?” Nami groans, holding her head in hand.

“What’s a Supernova?” Luffy asks.

Ace takes the responsibility of explaining. “They also call them Super Rookies, basically any rookie pirate who manages to get a bounty over 100,000,000 berri. There’s a group of 12 of you bound for Sabaody all around the same time, that’s your next destination, right?”

“I thought we were headed for Fishman Island?” Usopp says with a frown.

“Can’t go to Fishman Island without hitting Sabaody first,” I disagree, shaking my head. “And aren’t there only 11 of them—” I cut myself off. “Oh my god wait. No. *No—”*

“130,000,000 berri, Ed. You’re a Supernova too!” Ace says brightly.

“How the fuck did I manage that?!” I wail, holding the cup of water above my head while I deflate and put my forehead to the mattress.

“So me and Zoro are Supernovas too?” Luffy asks, plucking my cup and taking a sip before handing it back. I scowl at him and chug the rest out of spite.

“Sure are,” Ace confirms.

“We can go over the rest later, I want to call my friend and get all their posters before that,” I decide. There’s a loud burst of static. “Good god, this thing is terrible. I’m going back to using my snail as soon as we get going, Christ.”

“What were we talking about?” Ace mumbles, the snails eyebrows drawing together.

“Uhhhh…” I drone, my brows doing the same. What *were* we talking about?

“Dream blunt rotation. Something about a law?” Usopp supplies while Nami buries her face in Robin’s shoulder and cries.

I snap. “Right!” me and Ace exclaim at the same time.

“You two are becoming too similar. It’s honestly freaking me out, next thing we know you’ll just fuse into the same person,” Sanji mutters.

I tilt my head to the side and squint. “I think our final form would be Ace Lacewing, bug detective,” I say sagely.

“I don’t know what you said but I agree wholeheartedly,” Ace proclaims.

“What the actual *fuck* comes out of your mouth?” Nami sobs. “Where does this shit *come from?”*

“The deep dark of the human consciousness,” I say solemnly. “Anyway back to the topic at hand; seshing with the squad.”

“Can Sabo come? Some of the shit he has said since we’ve been calling has me *itching* to see what he does when he’s high,” Ace asks.

“Sure?” I agree, tilting my head. “What does that mean?”

“He just says odd shit. Like, all the time. Kind of like you, actually,” he elaborates. Aw, that’s so sweet. “He made a joke about crushing a guy’s skull yesterday, then immediately followed it up by asking what I had for lunch. The delivery was just like you, I think you two will get along great.”

I get the odd feeling he wasn’t joking about crushing a man’s skull, but I can appreciate seeing humour in acts of violence. “Sounds like my kind of guy. So if you're not… uh… anymore, what’s the plan?” I ask.

“Well you said you were bound for Fishman Island — you’re about to go to the New World, right?” he inquires.

I bite the inside of my cheek. Fuuuuck man, what am I gonna do about 3D2Y? We sorta kinda *absolutely* need the training gap, but… fucking damnit I don’t wanna be away from my friends that long. I don’t want to distract them from improving, but would having Transponders for each of us pose that big of an issue?

Goddamnit, me putting off planning shit is once again catching up to me. I’m gonna end up pushing off thinking about this again, then forget what’s going on around me, and get us all express delivery air mail sent to the four corners of the world before I can even think about changing anything.

“Yeah, we are,” Luffy answers for me, raising an eyebrow when I blink back into focus. Oops.

“How about we meet you there?” he suggests. I blink rapidly. “I’ve got a friend thereabouts I think you’ll like. I kinda doubt he’d want to join the sesh, but he’s a responsible dude. He can like… supervise us.”

Tell me his ass does not mean Jimbei. Tell me he does not want to make *Jimbei, First Son of the Sea* and *Warlord,* our *trip sitter.*

Without the context of me knowing what kind of man he is and who he’ll be to us, that is an insane thing to suggest right after I told him about exactly how many Warlords we’ve beefed

with.

“Yaknow what, absolutely. Why the fuck not?” I say manically, throwing my hands up.

Ace just laughs, the rat bastard. “So what’s with the music in the background?”

I tilt my head to look over at Brook as he keeps playing the piano. “Do you want the funny version or the long version?”

“Hit me with the best one,” he says without a second of hesitation.

“We found a singing skeleton and beat up a bunch of zombies so we could get his shadow back after it was kidnapped,” I say, choosing the secret third option; the blunt honest truth. “I beat up a resurrected Rocks Pirate and crawled through a super mega giant’s brain.”

“Ok what.”

“Oh also our skeleton has an afro.”

The snail groans, long and loud. “Yeah that’s a story I’m gonna need a lot of expanding on at some point.”

I hum. “Later. Hey, do you think I could get him to learn Frank Sinatra by forcing him to listen to my shell on repeat?”

“I don’t think he has the correct organs to listen and play anything by ear,” Usopp cracks, shit eating grin on his face.

“I love you, but I’ll kill you if I must,” I say solemnly.

“Alright so no on that one,” Usopp squeaks.

“Am I ever gonna get to listen to this thing?” Ace asks.

I pause. I think for a long second. “I’ll play it for you when we see each other,” I decide.

The snail smiles and hums, me the only one knowing the gravity of that choice, since Luffy either wasn’t paying attention or doesn’t care.

“I gotta go to the bathroom,” Luffy announces. We all stop to turn and stare at him. “But I don’t wanna miss any conversation, so it’s hanging up time now. Bye Ace!”

I blink a couple times as Luffy snatches the receiver from me. “Wha — BYE ACE, LOVE YOU!” I yell as Luffy slams it toward the cradle.

“Wait what—”

Yeah Luffy hangs up on Ace. We all watch him drop the snail onto the bed, jump off, and sprint for the open gap of wall that leads outside.

I eye the makeshift doorway for a beat. “Yeah I love that guy but man what the fuck.”

“There’s something wrong in that head of his, I just know it,” Sanji mumbles.

“He knows there’s a bathroom in here, right?” Franky asks, single eyebrow raised. “He isn’t just gonna go piss on the wall, right?”

“I… don’t know I want the answer to that,” Usopp mutters.

“That’s not sanitary. He won’t even wash his hands,” Chopper says in absolute dismay.

“I think it’s best not to speculate,” Robin says wisely.

“I don’t even have the words,” Nami grumbles.

“Aw shit wait, I forgot to tell Ace me and Luffy got married,” I realize. “Eh, whatever. I’ll tell him next time.”

“You are so… I don’t even have the words,” she repeats, shaking her head.

I give her a sunny grin, flop back onto the mattress, and say nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Happy chapter in the midst of... everything else! This is an Ace Lacewing stan account, fyi.

Excuse me for a moment while I get *really* emotional.
Since I won't be putting out a chapter on the 30th, the one year point since I started uploading the fic, I'm going to be all sentimental and shit on this one. I've actually got my interview for the job I want on the 30th lmao. I couldn't possibly express how much writing this and sharing it with you has affected me — here at the last few years of my brain developing you have managed to permanently plant yourselves in my psyche, and for that I have to thank you with the utmost earnestness.
For the people who have been here since the beginning, those of you who joined partway through, anyone who is reading this as their first up to date chapter after bingeing it (probably in 2 days, you predictable shits), and every person who reads this a week after it's up — a month, six, a year, maybe more — thank you. Thank you thank you *thank you.* Every time I thought my goddamn commitment and motivational issues

would win me over you were right there, and for that I am sincerely grateful.
Every comment — of which I read every single one even when I don't reply, I promise — whether you were cussing me out, singing my praises, just plain screaming, or only leaving hearts; I adore you and would singlehandedly beat the devil back into hell for you. And to my lurkers, people who just leave kudos, just subscribe, or don't do either, I love you the same. You don't have to feel bad about not displaying your love of something. From one lurker to another, I see you anyway and I know you care.
Every single person who reads through this whole slough of emotional bullshit, you are the wind in my sails and the rock in my storm, and I truly believe I wouldn't have half the god complex I do today without you. Fucking shit I told myself I wasn't gonna cry writing this, bitch please.
All of you. You are my torch in the dark. Thank you.

Anyway get a load of that guy, what a nerd. Fun chapter, yeah? Let's all sit and wait for the prophesied Dream Blunt Rotation™ because that's bound to be fun.

Chapter 96: Chapter Ninety Six: As The Songs Of The Dead Fill The Space Of My Ears

Chapter Summary

Bones in the Ocean - The Longest Johns

Luffy stares down at where his hand is holding mine for a second. “What’s up, Luf?” I ask, spinning us around another pair of people dancing.

Chapter Notes

This song is just *so fucking Brook coded.* Like?? It's literally him.

Y'all the Big Edit™ is done, it's over. It nearly killed me, but I did it. If you were holding off a reread, do it. If you'd rather die than reread nearly 400k, I respect you. I'm entirely blaming it for the fact I'm sick as FUCK now.

Oh I've got a Kofi now that I don't know how to work, you can find it on my Tumblr because it's against AO3 guidelines to link the actual page on here (thanks to the reader who pointed that out, you're a G).

It's the end of an arc! Ed gets to party! Fuck rest and responsibility with ones health!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tempo of the music Brook has been playing changes as he transitions to another song, and I pause in eating yet another plate of food for a second to listen. Behind the embellishments is a simple 3/4 beat.

I gingerly slide off the bed, shove my feet into my shoes, and plant my hands on my hips. “Ok, who’s waltzing with me?”

“Hah?! Ed, you are not dancing! You are injured! *Injured!”* Chopper shrieks.

“Ok, Usopp it is!” I say cheerfully, reaching out and yanking him by the overall straps with me closer to the music. “Do you know how to waltz?”

“Vaguely,” he responds, barely blinking at suddenly being pulled to dance before moving his hands into position to lead.

I swiftly correct that by sliding my hand to the middle of his back and taking his hand with my other. “Then brace yourself.”

Do I actually know how to waltz? Er — not *well* . I can do a decent box step and if I try hard enough, I can totally dip this motherfucker. Other than that? Not much.

Despite both of our inexperience, we glide smoothly across the floor, the picture of elegance until I accidentally trip Usopp and he goes crashing to the ground.

I stare down at him for a second as he twitches. “Oops. Sorry.”

I’m saved from his retaliation by Luffy bursting onto the scene to jump at me. “I wanna dance! My turn!” he demands.

I take another look at Usopp. He twitches again. “Yeah alright, let’s go.” Luffy whoops and lets me manoeuvre him into the correct positions. “Do you even know how to dance?”

“Nope!” he chirps. “That’s why you’re leading.”

And lead, I do. Brook’s melody slows as we twist around Usopp’s body and past a couple of the Victim’s Association, steps even and measured despite the occasional involuntary spasm of my muscles. Sure hope that isn’t permanent.

Luffy stares down at where his hand is holding mine for a second. “What’s up, Luf?” I ask, spinning us around another pair of people dancing.

He raises his eyes to meet mine. “Tell me what you did?” he prompts.

I smile and gently shake my head. “Nothing I wouldn't do again in a thousand lifetimes, Captain.”

The corner of Luffy’s mouth ticks down. He looks confused and a little bit lost, to be honest.

I’m hit with a sudden realization.

Luffy is brilliant. He’s the most emotionally intelligent person I’ve ever met, even beyond his incredible battle prowess — his understanding of people is in a league all its own and I know with absolute certainty he knows who I am down to my bones. His instincts are the sharpest of anyone I know, and I trust his gut implicitly.

He’s all that, and I know he couldn’t follow the logic I used when listening to my heart.

I smile wide enough to hurt, spinning us around again as we near Brook and his piano. “I’m finally the one shocking you, huh Captain?”

Luffy frowns before his face relaxes. “You’re always surprising me. You’re a good First Mate like that,” he says simply.

I can’t help but laugh, tugging him closer to my chest.

_____

I’m putting off the prophesied Crash™ as long as I possibly can, so when Luffy jumps off to pursue whatever flight of fancy has caught his attention now, I slip outside to let the sun sink into my skin and keep me up longer.

I walk just a bit until I'm tucked around the side of the wall where it's unbroken, then I close my eyes and tilt my head up.

"Ed."

I'm immediately shocked out of my reverie with a jump. I turn to the voice and let my shoulders relax. "Sanji," I greet.

His face is carefully blank as he strides up next to me, lighting up a cigarette and twisting the lighter through his knuckles. He says nothing for a long moment, taking a drag and letting the smoke slowly drift out through his open mouth.

"Can you promise me you'll never do what you did again?" he asks, breaking the silence.

"I can promise that specific sequence of events will never repeat exactly the same," I say, light and somewhat joking.

"Ed."

His tone isn't even berating. It's not accusatory, or admonishing. It's just tired. The slight smile I had on my face drops and I turn back to staring out at the sky. I don't answer his question.

Sanji takes an extended pull, then removes his cigarette to flick ash off the end. "I think finding you and mosshead in that clearing was the worst thing I've ever felt," he admits. My hands clench. "Waking up and realizing that he wasn't there anymore and I didn't know what had happened—" His hand tightens and his cigarette bends his half.

My hand half moves up to touch his arm, but I stop myself at the last second.

“I didn’t even notice you weren’t with us,” he says, voice raw. “I didn’t know you were gone until you started laughing from under this ship’s stupid flag, I was too busy losing my damn *shit* about how much blood a single person could lose.” Tremors start to wrack up his shoulders and they hitch up to his ears. “I didn’t even worry if you were ok first, I was just relieved that all of it wasn’t only Zoro’s and I’m so *sorry—”*

I let my hand grab onto his arm. He drops his cigarette and the hand holding his lighter presses its heel into the socket of his uncovered eye as a choked sob leaves his mouth.

“Sanji,” I murmur, taking a couple steps so I’m face to face with him. “It’s ok.”

“I’m supposed to worry about you,” he says, voice cracking and eyes still covered. “I’m supposed to worry about *you.”*

“Sanji,” I repeat. “You have an absolutely gigantic heart — you’re literally the kindest person I know, you worry about everyone.”

He shakes his head. “Ed,” he says.

“It’s alright your priorities started with Zoro, him knocking you out would literally be the last thing you remember,” I continue, softly touching his wrist with the tips of my fingers.

“Ed,” Sanji says again, imploring. He drops his hand from his face. His hair is all mussed up, the usually covered left eye peeking out from under blond bangs.

I pause. I look in his eyes.

Sanji has the first hint of eyebags starting to set in, and his skin is wet from the tears he was pushing into his face. His irises are ever so slightly shaking, and his pupils are big black ink blots in the blue. Now that I know what I’m looking for, I see it plain as day.

I suck in a sharp breath. “Oh,” I say quietly.

His expression crumples. Words rush out of his mouth. “It’s not fair — that idiot wouldn’t let me help him and It’s my fault I wasn’t strong enough to stop him from knocking me out—”

“It’s ok, Sanji,” I soothe.

“—It isn’t fair you had to pick up the slack and now you’re hurt because I couldn’t stop him myself and it was just so *scary* finding that clearing—” he whimpers, chest starting to rise and fall rapidly.

I lean in and gently brush my lips against his. He becomes still and silent. “It’s *ok,* Sanji,” I mumble against his mouth. “You can be scared, it was scary, but you’re going to have to keep living scared.”

There’s a prolonged moment of silence. “That sounds miserable,” he eventually mutters.

“A little bit,” I agree. “Love is a little miserable at times.” Sanji ever so slightly flinches against me, but doesn’t move away from where our mouths are just resting against each other’s. “We might feel it differently, but the principle is the same. It just makes the relief ten times stronger. When that stupid boy wakes up you’ll get to berate him to your heart’s content, and you’re going to feel amazing. Could you believe that?”

I feel Sanji’s lashes flutter against my brow bone. “I’m not sure if I can,” he confesses. “How am I supposed to just… carry this around?”

“‘A heart is a heavy burden,’” I quote. “But you’ll learn to live with it. Whether you decide to do something to make it better or worse is up to you, I won’t push. Lord knows it would take nothing short of the devil holding your souls hostage to make you two boys talk about your feelings.”

Sanji laughs weakly and I feel it in my teeth. His palm slides against my cheek, then he slowly pulls back. “I — thank you, Ed,” he mumbles.

I give him a warm smile, stepping back to return to my previous place at his side. “Of course, Sanji.”

He pulls back out his pack of cigs, toeing the one he dropped earlier. He holds the box out to me. “Would you like to smoke with me?”

I chuckle softly and push the pack back towards him. “If I start smoking cigarettes I’ll never stop, I can feel it in my bones. And at the rate that I consume, we don’t have the coffers to keep up with that kind of habit for me,” I say honestly.

Sanji laughs, a little hoarse, and plucks just one out of the pack. “Fair enough. Would you like to go back inside to avoid this, then?”

I shake my head. “Nah, I’ll just second hand smoke with you today.”

Sanji hums, lighting the stick up and scratching his thumbnail across the scuffed surface of his cheap lighter. We both stare out at the sky while he smokes.

“I read one of those Sora comics you gave me.”

“Yeah?”

“I liked the main character. Not so keen on the colourful guys, though.”

“Yeah, I’m not super keen on those Power Ranger knockoffs either.”

“Power Ranger knockoffs?”

“Yeah.”

_____

“Good afternoon, Ed.”

I look up from where I’m sat against the wall outside as Brook walks over next to me. Sanji had retreated back into the party some time ago, but I remained out here and have been twisting the long grass into little braids.

Maybe the sounds and the festivities and the party would keep me more awake, but it doesn’t particularly appeal right now.

“Hey, Brook,” I greet. “Not playing music?”

“Taking a small break to stretch my muscles,” he says pleasantly. “Or I would be if I had any, yohohoho!” I snicker, twisting a flower into my braid. Brook sits down beside me and sets his cane against the wall. “I’ve officially joined your crew. In case anyone has neglected to inform you,” he says, tone high and happy.

I give him a sweet smile. “Good. If I have to threaten to kidnap another person to get them to join our crew, the joke might get a little old.”

Brook chuckles, and we enter a companionable silence. I twine together more blades of grass, threading a few of the already braided pieces together to make something longer and thicker.

“I saw everything,” Brook says suddenly.

I pause, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, then back to my braid with a hum. “Ah. Figured it’d be something like that.”

I can feel him looking at me as I plait another chunk of my craft together. “What you did was foolish. Brave, but foolish,” he says softly.

I sigh, dropping my hands into my lap to turn and regard him. “Brook, I did what I had to do. I know you haven’t known us for very long, so you don’t have a whole lot of context on my reasoning, but…” I take a deep breath. “There’s not a single one of my bones I wouldn’t turn into smithereens for that boy. I would destroy my body six ways to Sunday for him, the state of me doesn’t mean shit if it brings him to where he needs to go.”

“You nearly put another death on your head with that stunt,” Brook murmurs lowly. “If you aren't more careful, it's the state of your soul you will need to be more concerned with — not your body.”

I frown. “The state of my soul..?”

His skeletal face is static and unmoving as he speaks, a gravity to his words that makes them seem like they echo. “Did you not think there would eventually be consequences for pushing and pushing and *pushing* yourself? That the damage you seem keen to take would reach beyond the physical?”

My mouth opens and closes. For some reason my brain catches on the dream I had, and just how damn *vivid* it was. The longer I’ve been here, the more they almost seem real, like I’m not dreaming at all. “I — I don’t…”

Brook shifts and the light catches on his face differently and suddenly he doesn’t seem nearly as intense. “That is to say there are some things that are much more delicate than we would like to believe.”

I blink twice at him. I gently shake my head to clear my thoughts. “...Right. But I don’t really have a line I wouldn’t cross. If it takes shredding my soul, so be it.”

Brook slowly shakes his head back and forth. “That’s… not wise.”

I slowly clench and unclench my hands, watching the tendons shift over my knuckles and acutely feeling the muscles shift in my arms. “It’s ok if you don’t understand. I’m his eyes, it’s my responsibility to look out for him.”

“I understand,” Brook insists. I open my mouth to protest and he rests a skeletal hand on my knee. “I *understand.”*

I look up into the empty sockets of his face before letting my eyes drop to my lap. “Yeah, I guess you would.”

“He seems like a very special boy,” Brook murmurs, voice gentle. “I can see why you feel the way you do, I wouldn’t have sworn myself to your crew if I thought otherwise. But in my experience, a good Captain — like him— would much rather die for his crew than let them die for him.”

I return my gaze to Brook’s face and remember that he was Captain of the Rumbar Pirates at the end.

“My Captain, Yorkie was his name, stayed behind when he knew he could no longer continue without causing the crew harm. He would have rather faced the sea alone than burden us. He was an incredible man, and I’m lucky to have spent the years I did with him.” The way Brook’s voice curls around his old Captain’s name like music leaves my hands feeling warm as I move to hold his own. “I see that same spirit within Luffy, that’s why I know I made the right choice.”

I run the pads of my fingers over his phalanges, brow furrowing. “I’m not suicidal,” I feel the need to insist. “I want to live like this, with him and all my friends, as long as I possibly can. But… *god,* do you ever feel like every second you’re happy here it’s something you’ve stolen right out of the stiff hands of death?”

He lets out a breathy chuckle. “Yes, I can say with complete and total honesty I do.”

I snort weakly. “Yeah, alright, stupid question.”

“You know something, though…” He tilts his head up into the sun and gives the illusion of a deep breath. “It’s not stealing if it’s given freely. And I do hope you haven’t forgotten that you’re a pirate.”

I laugh with a little more heart this time. “Yeah, yeah. Stealing is in the job description.”

“Exactly,” he hums.

I pluck my plaited grass… thing from my lap and circle it around Brook’s wrist. “I suppose we’re all stuck in a feedback loop,” I muse, weaving the ends together.

“How do you mean?” Brook asks, staring down at what I’m doing.

“When it comes down to it, it’s easier to die for your loved ones than live for them,” I explain, grabbing another flower to twine through the makeshift bracelet. “When your back’s to the wall, 9 times out of 10 people like us will bargain with their lives. Maybe we all have the same psychological defect, maybe we’re just crazy.”

“And the feedback loop?” he prompts.

“When you’ve got a group of assholes all willing to die for each other, eventually one of them is going to try that shit, and then everyone else will dogpile on and try to do the same. As soon as someone starts the precedent that dying is an option for protection, it becomes acceptable for the rest of the group,” I elaborate. “There’s definitely a term for that — I’m just way too tired to remember. Mob mentality, I guess?”

“So you see someone go to the extreme to protect you, and take that as permission to do the same,” he reiterates.

I nod, twisting and tugging my creation until I’m satisfied. “So essentially we’re all stuck in a Mexican standoff with each other because I’d trust any single one of them with my life; just not with their own if a situation where one of us had to sacrifice ourselves to keep the rest of the group safe arose,” I finish. I hold Brook’s wrist up so he can see the thick bangle I’ve woven around him. “Boom. Friendship bracelet.”

He chuckles, lifting it close to inspect it. “Very good craftsmanship, Ed. And an interesting theory. You seem to know a lot about the human condition.”

I snort. “I was a fucking English major with plans for a Psychology minor, people are my bread and butter.”

“Nothing in that sentence made sense, but I’ll take your word for it,” Brook says brightly.

I laugh harder.

———

I’m just exiting the bathroom when a hand slams into the wall right in front of my face. I freeze solid, for a second thinking we someone managed to fuck this trip so bad there’s still a zombie about, before I realize who it is.

“We need to talk,” Nami growls, pushing me back inside the bathroom.

I walk backwards with her hand on my chest until I hit the wall, then she once again slams her other hand into it beside my head. I look at the hand on the wall, then at the hand on my chest, then up at Nami with a raised eyebrow. “I pinkie promise you there’s easier ways to seduce me.”

She makes a strangled sound of anger, and I low-key prepare myself to get decked in the face as her hand tightens into a fist on my sweater, the fabric bunching up and pulling taught over my shoulders.

“Are you going to pass out any minute now?” Nami demands.

“Er — I don’t think so?” I say awkwardly.

“Good,” she grunts. Then she grabs my shoulders and pushes down until I’m sitting on the floor. “This bathroom better have been cleaned regularly.”

I take a quick look around. It’s not the same bathroom that she murdered Cindry in, obviously since this is the mast mansion and not Hogback’s, it’s significantly smaller and the bathtub she’s sat me beside is less than half the size of the goddamn swimming pool that one had.

Don’t get me wrong; I wouldn’t lick the tiles up in this bitch, but for a bathroom in a tower inhabited mainly by zombies, this place is pretty damn clean.

“I mean… this grout isn’t even discoloured, so I’m just gonna assume whoever was in charge of cleaning in this place was fucking neurotic about it,” I say slowly as Nami drops down onto the rim of the tub beside me, staring down with a blank look.

We both stare for a while. I look away and look back. Nami keeps staring. I feel sweat start to collect under my collar and I tug it to get some airflow.

“So?” she prompts.

I jump. “Er — So?” I parrot.

“Are you going to make this easy, and are we doing this the hard way?” Nami hisses, leaning forward. She slides her fingernail under the edge of the bandage wrapped around my head with precision, pulling just enough to let it snap back without tugging it out of place. “I’m waiting.”

I blink twice. “Uh. I’m sorry I worried you, I didn’t plan to get absolutely fucking bodied on this trip, yes I probably could have handled this situation better, I’m sorry for being reckless, no I’m not sorry for doing what I did, yes I’m sorry it turned out like it did, no I won’t tell you what I did, and yes I actually asked the Warlord to stay and have a drink with me,” I say in one breath, listing everything I can think of. “Oh — and yes, I’m in a fair bit of pain and will probably be out for the next 2-4 business days.”

Nami blinks slowly at me, cat-like and still creepily blank. “Hm,” she hums. “No, that covered a bit of it, but you missed the most important mark.”

I furrow my brow. “What did I — oh. Right. I promise not to be stupid like that again?”

She nods firmly. “That’s what I wanted to hear. You mean that?” I make a face. “What is that. What is that expression.”

“I mean it,” I say dubiously. “I’m not gonna go off and die with Zoro while the rest of you are knocked out.”

Nami glares harshly at me. “You don’t sound genuine at all!”

I throw my hands up, wincing when it pulls on my ribs. “I am so genuine! I’m the most genuine motherfucker you’ve ever seen!”

She jabs her finger at my forehead. “Then act like it! I don’t fucking believe you when you say you’ll stop acting like a damn fool the second things look rough when you turn around and do it again the *second* we’re in danger!”

I freeze with my mouth half open with a retort, Brook's admonishments and my own observation echoing louding down the valleys of my brain. "Ah," I breathe out, "feedback loop."

"What?" Nami asks, scrunching her nose.

"Oh, it's just something I said to Brook," I say with a hand wave. "About how we're all selfless little assholes who can't stop sacrificing ourselves for each other."

Nami gingerly slides down from the edge of the tub to sit by my side, squished in between me and the porcelain until I scoot over to make room. "I think that's mostly just you," she says dryly.

"Nope," I hum, stifling a yawn in my hand. "It's all of us. Zoro, obviously. Sanji just tried that shit. Robin tried that shit like a week ago. Luffy fights the big bad for us all the time. We're all guilty of doing it."

She makes a huffy sound. "Not me. I'm smarter than that."

I blink my suddenly very bleary eyes at her. "Yuh huh. Say, do you remember Cocoyashi? Just out of idle curiosity," I say sarcastically.

Nami scowls and tilts her nose up. "Shut up."

I chuckle softly before it's broken up by another yawn. "Uuugh. I think I lied about not passing out any minute," I mumble, rubbing my fingers under my eyes.

Nami groans quietly. "Really? Now? I'm not gonna be able to carry you back out there, we're gonna have to wait for someone to find us."

I give her a sleepy smile. “Sorry. Duty calls or something. Don’t worry about moving me too much, I don’t think a typhoon could wake me from this. We can get going as soon as Zoro is up though, I’d hate to delay us.”

“Selfless little asshole. If that’s what you want.” Nami heaves a put-upon sigh and guides my head onto her shoulder. “Falling asleep in a bathroom — really Ed, how uncouth,” she says, voice quiet but imperious.

I snort into the inked skin of her tattoo, lashes fluttering until my eyes are slipping shut. “It’s called a restroom for a reason,” I mutter, trying desperately to keep the darkness from closing in at the corners.

“Ed?” Nami says quietly as I take a too-loud breath in the quiet of the room.

“I’m scared to dream again,” I say honestly. I don’t want to slip back into the skin of that green haired person, don’t want to feel the heavy weight of a crown or the slick slide of blood from a fatal spear wound. I don’t want to feel like anyone but myself for a while.

“Are you scared to dream of something specific?” she asks gently. I nod. Her fingers brush over my hair and I feel my eyes shutter a bit more closed. “Then you’ll dream of something else, or nothing at all. I’ll make sure of it,” she promises.

I try to express how much the sentiment means through the few ways I can communicate right now. I brush my lips against her shoulder and exhale through my nose.

“Any suggestions for alternatives?” Nami asks, voice sounding farther and farther away.

“I miss dreaming about my sister,” I admit, the thought leaving my mouth as soon as it appears, however slow and slurred it is.

Nami stills, but I don’t really notice. “Then… then your sister, or nothing at all. I can do that,” she promises. She isn’t talking in a whisper, I’m sure of it, but that’s how I hear it all

the same.

“Thank you, Nami,” I manage to murmur before my consciousness steals away, not a single hope of waking for quite some time.

Chapter End Notes

LMAO GUYS THE ZOSAN WAS AN ACCIDENT. I DID NOT MEAN TO DO THAT UNTIL IT WAS HAPPENING. I mean I meant to do Zosan I just didn't mean to do it *here.* Goddamnit those homosexuals made me do it. Also didn't mean for the absolutely necessary Sanji & Ed kiss to go there, but honestly if it works it works. Catch me in the corner making Sanji use Zoro's actual name during a moment of vulnerability because I DO WHAT I WANT.

The best part of writing is your story real life actual possessing you and using your hands to yank the steering wheel the direction it wants to go. Jesus take the wheel but Jesus is a traumatized gun wielding menace with dependency issues.

Sanji: *basically confesses he is head over heels for Zoro, who is unconscious in the other room*
Ed: Fuck I gotta kiss him now before that goddamn shrub can

E. D. "I can't not kiss him" Domino every chance they get, just planting one of their crewmates. That's 3/8 baby, they're making their way through 'em.

Deep talks with bone grandpa are an absolute necessity. You would not believe the struggle I face every time I'm like "aight this is the place for a bone pun, go for it," like please... I do situational comedy, puns are hard.

Y'all ready for art? Looooots of art this week.

First: Ofc I made art for the party. Who do you think I am?

Second: I FINALLY MADE THE COLLEGE AU. IT'S HERE. She's been a long time coming, I'm gonna add the link to the chapter I first mentioned it in as well. It is very near and dear to my heart ♥.

Jesus remember when my authors notes were short? Me either.

Chapter 97: Chapter Ninety Seven: Minted From The Ivory Of Your Tooth And Eye

Chapter Summary

Eurus - The Oh Hellos

I crack my eyes open just the barest bit and for a moment all I can see is a golden halo. “God?” I mumble groggily.

Chapter Notes

Starting the new saga off strong with The Oh Hellos. I love that band so very much, you have no idea.

Mourn with me soldiers, I did not get the job I interviewed for. But I was VERY POLITE in my reply email and I was CORDIAL AS FUCK and they would have been LUCKY TO HAVE ME.

Also I need glasses now. So that's fun. I really am reverting to middle school me, it's not a joke anymore I'm afraid.

Y'all I did not sleep. EARLY ASS chapter because I'm posting this then passing the fuck out for the day. Happy mothers day tho lmaooooooooo. Are we allowed to have a mothers day in a fandom with more moms in fridges than there are chapters of this fic?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When I finally manage to wake up, it’s slow and soft.

I mean, kinda. I take to consciousness like bankruptcy: gradually, then suddenly.

It starts with the pleasant thought that I didn’t have any more weird dreams while I was out, nothing at all. Bless Nami and her mind witch powers of awesomeness. Then it’s appreciation for the soft blanket I can feel I’m swaddled up in and a wonder for how long I was out.

Then I feel some kind of presence looming over me.

I crack my eyes open just the barest bit and for a moment all I can see is a golden halo. "God?" I mumble groggily.

"No stupid, it's me," I hear Luffy's voice respond.

"Close enough," I grumble, eyes slipping back shut as I snuggle further into the blanket.

"Nuh uh, Chopper said once you wake up you gotta stay up," Luffy says, snapping his fingers in my face.

I squint enough to see where he is so I can swat his fingers away from me. "Why? Lemme naaaaaaap," I moan. My voice is cracky and rough from disuse, and my mouth tastes like a fucking urn.

"But it's been five days, I miss you!" Luffy whines, flopping down on top of me.

I groan under his weight but just kinda let it happen. Then his words register and my eyes fly open. "Five days?" I repeat, not moving.

"Five days," he confirms, nuzzling into my neck. "You missed all the craaazy weather, there was this big fish thing too. And Nami said we're almost at the Red Line."

Well. Isn't that something. I don't think I've ever slept that long in my *life.* Does that technically count as a coma?

"Almost at the Red Line, wow," I murmur.

It's been such a trip to get to this point. This journey has been hard, it's been rewarding, it's been beautiful and it's been… well, painful. I flex my fingers and take a breath.

"Can I get up now?" I ask, lifting my hand to run it through his hair and making a face at what I feel. "Why is your hair so greasy? Jesus Christ, tell me you've showered since I've been out."

"Of course I have," he says petulantly. "I fell in the ocean, like, yesterday."

I make a gagging sound. "Oh my god get off, I am not touching you until you're clean. Why is it the second I take my eyes off you, you forget basic hygiene?"

"I didn't forget!" he gasps. "And I *did* shower, like two days ago!"

I push him off the bed. "Go shower right now, or I swear to god I'm drowning you."

He makes an exaggerated groan before getting to his feet. "Fiiiiine, but you're not allowed to move until then. Chopper said you're on bedrest until he gives his vertical."

"Verdict?"

"Yeah that one."

"Ok, you gonna send him in?" I ask, trying to push myself into a seated position and pausing when the muscles in my arms spasm wildly before going limp. "Oh that doesn't seem good."

Luffy leans in closer, brows turned down and a worried frown marring his face. "Are you ok?"

I take a deep breath, furrowing my brow and nodding. “Yeah, I’m ok. Help me sit up before you go?”

He nods silently, reaching past me to rearrange the pillows before slowly helping me up. I rest my forehead on his collarbones as he holds my shoulder and moves stuff around behind me. Then I wrinkle my nose. “Oh, you smell like brine and sweat. You salty-ass-taffy-man, go clean yourself before you get within ten feet of me again.”

Luffy sticks his tongue out at me. “Fine! Time me!” Then he’s sprinting out the door and around the corner, letting the door bang shut behind him.

I sigh, fondly shaking my head before looking down at my hands in my lap and frowning. I flex my fingers, opening and closing my fist. My muscles keep freezing and getting stuck as I move them, refusing to unclench for seconds. It gets easier to move them the longer I do it, but the fact that it’s happening at all is frustrating enough.

The door swings open much more gently then it was last closed, and I look over as Chopper comes trotting into the room with his medical bag in hand. “Hey, Chops,” I greet, a still tired smile balanced carefully on my face.

“Hi, Ed,” he replies, dragging the chair from the vanity to my bedside and dropping his bag onto the end table. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Sore. Pretty damn thirsty,” I answer honestly.

Chopper hums, reaching past his bag for a tall glass of water I hadn’t seen and scooting closer so he can hold it up to my face, turning the bendy straw sticking out of it towards me. “Not all that surprising. Why was Luffy running like his pants were on fire? Hey! Drink slowly!”

I gulp down the mouthful of water I sucked up and cough lightly, pressing my hand to my chest when that makes it ache somewhere deep behind my sternum. “Yeah, point taken,” I say roughly. “I told Luffy he had to shower. Why was no one on top of that?”

“I think Sanji tried to make him, but Luffy wouldn’t listen,” Chopper says with a frown. “It’s really good that you’re finally awake though, any longer and I would have gotten worried. I don’t know if you’re up for visitors — everyone has been missing you — but I told them to wait until you’re up for it and to keep from crowding you.”

“Thank you,” I sigh. “I love you guys with all my heart, but I’m still pretty fucking tired. I don’t think I can entertain the lot of you right now without following it up with another coma-length nap.”

He makes a commiserating hum, a look of understanding on his face. “I’m gonna give you a full physical, but is there anything you’re particularly concerned about first?”

I look back at my hands where they’re pressed lightly on the bottom of the glass, with Chopper’s hooves actually holding it. “How long does it take muscles to atrophy?”

He takes the glass and puts it back on the table when it looks like I’m done. “It would take weeks at minimum for any kind of atrophy to set in, why do you ask?”

I hold my hands up and demonstrate the clenching and unclenching, scowling at their refusal to cooperate. “I dunno what this is then, but it’s pissing me off.”

Chopper frowns and reaches out to fiddle with my hands. “Open and close them again?” he prompts. I do as he says. “Hm. This is just a preliminary guess, but it seems to behave like Myotonia. And this is the first time it's happened? You don’t have any memory of this occurring before, even mildly?”

I shake my head silently. He slips a notepad out of his bag and scribbles something down. I glance out the window onto the deck. I can just barely spot the orange of Nami’s hair and a shirt I’m fairly certain belongs to Robin behind her.

“Myotonia is genetic, you see,” Chopper continues, “so it’s not really plausible it’s something you would develop because of strain or overtaxing yourself. I mean, there’s no precedent for

that, as far as I know. It is possible you've had it the whole time and it's just showing now as a coincidence?"

"Chopper, how the fuck should I know?" I deadpan.

He rolls his eyes. "Anyway, there's other explanations that aren't genetic; I don't think it's Brody disease since you haven't been exercising for a few days, could be myositis I guess, but I doubt it's Issacs or Hoffmann syndrome… I'd recommend you take an EMG test but I don't have the equipment on the ship and I know you don't like needles, but if this persists then the next time we stop at an island with a hospital we really should go," he rambles.

I blink slowly at him. "All of that went over my head." Then I frown again. "Is it gonna stick around? I don't wanna deal with this for the rest of my life."

He sighs. "As it is, we don't know enough for me to answer that honestly. I can put you under observation for it, and we can do some trials to figure out the extent when you're ready to do physical activity again."

"When I'm ready to do physical activity again?" I parrot, sitting up straighter. "What do you mean?"

Chopper shoots me a look as he starts pulling instruments out of his bag. "Ask me again when I'm done looking you over."

I heave a sigh, but comply.

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"Ok, for now everything looks stable," Chopper announces when he's finally done poking and prodding and ordering me around.

“Can Ed come and hang out now?” Luffy asks hopefully, leaning forward until the towel on his head almost slips off. He had come back in five minutes into Chopper’s exam, and I took one look at him and sent him back to get clean for real.

“No,” Chopper says shortly.

“Whaaaat?” me and Luffy both groan.

“You’re still on bedrest! I don’t want you moving from this spot for *at least* one more day, and if you have to get up you’re getting help!” he demands, pointing his pen at me threateningly.

“Chooooooooops!” I groan, rolling my head back to rest on my pillow. “You’re gonna confine me to my room? Am I *grounded?* Is this *HOUSE ARREST?”*

“I don’t know what that means, but yes!” Chopper snaps. “I’ll tie you to this bed if I have to, I’m not above using primitive methods!”

I shrink away from him. “Jesus, ok Chopper. I can’t even get up by myself to use the bathroom?”

He glares harshly at me. “Do you think you could go down a staircase without hurting yourself? Answer honestly.”

My eyes shift away. “Fair point,” I concede.

Chopper finishes packing up his things and hops down from his seat, pausing in the door to look back at me. “I’ll be back later. If you need anything, call down to the deck with your Transponder. And don’t move!”

Then the door is shut and it's just me and my Captain. Luffy makes it maybe five minutes before I can see his eyes start darting to the window and door every other word. I roll my own and sigh. "Pass me my bag and Transponder case."

Luffy doesn't blink at the command and moves to do just that, hauling my backpack out of my part of the four-door closet and onto the bed beside me, Transponder case following right after. "Anything else?"

"Nope. Go ahead," I say with a fond smile, reaching out to flick a still damp strand of hair out of his face.

Luffy whoops, leaning forward to smack a kiss into my cheek. He gives me a big beaming smile, then races out of the room hollering "CALL IF YOU NEED ME!" over his shoulder.

"Idiot," I scoff, smiling anyway.

With considerable alone time likely in my future, I take my time sifting through my belongings. It isn't nearly as depressing as the last time, and I take moments to smile at everything I pull out. I've just tugged out my flannel, the yellow one from my grandpa, when something falls out of the folds onto my lap.

The coin I got from Iceberg winks at me from the bedspread and I toss my flannel onto one of the plush chairs that decorate the room, already holding a few other pieces of clothing. I pick the cool metal up and run my fingers over the raised details.

The wave is smooth and the letters are a nice texture, and I restrain myself from biting down on it. That would be bad for my teeth. I run my thumbnail over the mint mark sitting at the bottom of the coin and frown at it.

It's actually a pretty clever design, I think. It looks like a 7 and a G hugging each other with an extra line that almost makes it look like a weird ice cream cone. I frown harder. Why does that..?

I pause. I bring it closer and squint at it. “No way.” I move it further back and stare at it from a distance. “That would be crazy. That would be a fucking wild ass coincidence. No way.”

But also…

I drop the coin back into my lap and snap my arm out to grab my spyglass case. I jerk the button open and yank it close to my face. I squint at the insignia and tilt my head so the light hits it right.

“Holy *shit,”* I curse softly. Because it’s an impression the whole coin is inverted, and so much of the detail of this thing is lost, but that mint mark is the exact same. I’d bet anything it is.

I sit frozen for a long moment.

Then I’m scrambling for my Transponders — thank fucking *god,* I missed ones that aren’t dogshit — and punching in a number for the first time.

It rings for one beat, two, then it connects with a sharp click. “Hello, you’ve reached the office of Mayor Iceberg, how may I help you?” a young girl’s voice asks, sounding proper and prim from the President’s mouth.

“It’s an emergency, I really need to talk to Iceberg!” I blurt, back aching as I lean forward off the pillows that have been propping me up.

“Of course, he’ll be right with you,” she says politely.

I gnaw on my lip as the snail goes silent for a moment, knee bouncing under the covers and my finger twisting up in the chord of the receiver. I have to place the receiver itself on the bedspread when my muscles start doing unpleasant things from holding it so tight.

“Hello? Who is it?” Iceberg’s voice filters through, the President taking on his likeness.

“Iceberg! I’ve got a super urgent question!” I exclaim.

“Ed? How did you get this number?” he asks, brow furrowed and voice confused.

“Stole it while we were in your office, don’t worry about it. So about that coin you gave me,” I babble. “The fucking — the *mint mark.* Tell me about the goddamn mint mark!”

“The mint — are you alright?” Iceberg questions, looking more bewildered by the second.

“I don’t have time for your concerned bullshit! Spill the beans!” I holler.

The snail blinks, taken aback. “Oh my. Alright. I’m assuming you mean the insignia at the bottom middle of the coin?”

“Yes,” I say impatiently.

“That would be the mintmaster mark. Or a maker's mark, with this fellow it’s essentially the same,” he explains. “In layman's terms and in the spirit of simplicity, it’s basically the craftsman’s signature. It looks like a G and a 7, yes?”

“Yuh huh, so if a coin had that mintmasters mark, it would mean your craftsman made it?” I rush out.

“Logically, yes. What is this about?” he asks.

“I have this heirloom, it’s got a coin stamped in it and I didn’t notice until now but it has the same mintmaster mark and I gotta know more about it or I’ll cry,” I explain hastily. “Any

way you could do that for me?"

Iceberg blinks. "You know, you have impeccable timing. I actually have Guiessou's records on hand — I was doing some legislature because a few of our records got damaged during the… incident."

Thank heavenly *fuck* for my impeccable timing and the misfortune of that city.

"Could you give me anything to go off of? A year, a description, a timeframe to narrow this down?" Iceberg asks, his voice accompanied by the sounds of chair wheels moving and the flipping of paper.

If this motherfucker had this made while he was in Water 7 and he was with the Roger Pirates at the time — and it have had to been before the crew split up at the very least since the guy presumably left it with Crocus at that time — it would proooobably be around when the Oro Jackson was constructed, but just to play it safe…

"Uh, at least 20 years ago," I answer. "I'm pretty certain that's a crown in the middle. It's got what I think are X's or something above that. There's… words around the rim, I think? Like I said, it's a stamping so it's backwards and the details are pretty shoddy."

Iceberg hums, more paper flipping sounds rustling through. "20 years… That should be right around here. This could take a while, there's a lot to go through. So how have you been?"

"Pretty shit, to be honest," I sigh. "I'm back on bedrest, that's why I have the time to be noticing things like this."

"Oh? What did you do this time?" he asks absentmindedly, paper still ruffling in the background.

"Picked a fight with a Warlord. Then another Warlord got the jump on us," I say plainly. The rustling pauses for a moment. "If you just stopped to stare at your Transponder in disbelief

I’m gonna find a way to reach through this thing and slap you silly.”

The rustling resumes. “Of course not. You and your crew never fail to do the insane, I suppose. Will I be hearing about this in the paper anytime soon?”

“Nah, we all got away so they’ll be too embarrassed to let it go to print,” I respond, letting my back settle into the pillows again.

“I’m back to 30 years now, I’m still not seeing anything,” he says dubiously.

“Keep looking,” I plead. “This is important.”

“Of course,” Iceberg murmurs. “Not as much work over these years. Seems he hit something of a dry patch. That’s the 40 year mark, still not much done. Ah,” he cuts himself off. “That would be why.”

“What? What did you find?” I ask, fighting to keep myself from jerking upright.

“Seems he got a very well paying commission before that. He was doing less work because he didn’t have to be working as much,” he says faintly. “That is an obscene number for a coin. In other news, I’ve found what you’re looking for.”

I can’t help but shuffle upwards at that, scooting back so I can be more upright against my pillow blockade. “C’mon, don’t leave me in suspense. Tell me the shit or I swear to god—”

“Hold your horses,” he says with an amused huff. “It says here it was sold to a third party — meaning it wasn’t commissioned within his contract with the city… hm, I think LDC is some kind of legal acronym, but don’t quote me on that. You were right about the crown, that’s its centerpiece. It says here the coin was based on a pre-existing design.”

I'm practically vibrating as he describes stuff, staring down at the sloppy recreation I had carved into the buttplate of my pistol. "The words? Do you know what the words say?"

"Ah, of course. This… is this Latin?" he mumbles. They have Latin here? "Those X's you were talking about — there's three of them and two I's. I believe that's… 32 in Roman numerals." They have *Roman numerals* here? "Why are these words so damn small? Give me a moment, I need to put on my glasses."

"Damnit Iceberg, I'll die of old age before I learn anything at this rate," I complain. I barely know any Latin, I'm so not going to be able to understand whatever this says.

"Yes, yes. My apologies," he mutters. "There we go. Below the crown it says 100 value, and above it… is that a mint mark? I think it says PI, but that may not be actual letters. There's a few mint marks between some of the letters and words too, I don't know if that's punctuation or not. The first word is dominion."

"Dominion," I repeat, rolling the word around my mouth and scrawling it out on a notepad I had handy. Or at least trying to, my hand is having *a time of it* gripping the pencil steady. Fucking Mylato-whatever Chopper said. "Good word. I like it."

"Next is astra, followed by venu — veniun — nope, that's not right. Gee, I need to have my prescription updated," Iceberg grumbles. "Sorry. *Veniant,* that's what that says. I really don't know if that's a period, comma, or just a mint mark. The last word is reges, followed by another mark that could frankly be anything."

"Dominion astra veniant reges," I recite. "What the fuck does that mean? All I know is dominion and astra. So like… domain star, something?"

"Ah… do I have a Latin dictionary in here?" he mumbles, chair wheels squealing through the receiver.

"I mean, Rex is king and Regina is queen, maybe reges fits in there somehow? I don't know," I mutter to myself. I only know that because of the motto on the back of Canadian coins, funnily enough. "I haven't the foggiest what the hell veniant means."

“Oh I do have a Latin dictionary in here,” Iceberg says, voice awash in surprise, “lucky me.”

“What does the front of the coin look like?” I ask out of curiosity.

“No idea. It says the customer retained the obverse side for safety reasons, whatever that could mean,” he says offhandedly, the sounds of flipping paper filling the space once more.

“Retained for safety?” I parrot incredulously. What the fuck could possibly be on the other side of that?

“Here we are. It roughly, and I do mean *roughly,* translates to this; let kings come to the domain of the stars. Or let the kings rule over the stars? It really depends on the context of dominion — whether it means *have* dominion or if it means dominion like a place. And if any of those marks were punctuation, it may mean something else entirely.”

“Alright. So that isn’t ideal,” I say slowly. “Fucking Latin. I don’t know enough about linguistics for this shit.”

“I’ll send you a copy of this, maybe you can make better heads or tails of it than I can. Um, pun not intended,” he says with a chuckle.

I heave a sigh, leaning back and staring at the ceiling. “Thank you,” I say sincerely. “This means more than you know. You are the realest motherfucker out there.”

“I’m happy to help,” he says demurely. “Is there anything else I can do for you while you have me here?”

I think for a second. “I don’t think so? Yeah, this was all I needed. I’ll let you get back to work, say bye to your new assistant for me, will you? I gotta tell you, my impression was only a few seconds but I already think it’s a vast improvement from your last one,” I joke.

Iceberg laughs. “Sure thing. Pleasure speaking with you, Ed,” he says pleasantly.

“You too. I’ll tell Franky you say hi and that you miss him so very much, bye-bye now!” I sing into the receiver.

“Wait what—”

Yeah I hang up on him.

I stare down at my writing and the coin sitting on the paper beside it. I pick my pencil back up and make a quick rubbing of it, cogs turning in my head as I hold it up to my eye.

“I wonder…” I murmur, flipping it through my knuckles. I glance back over at my Transponders.

Then the door bangs open and I jump as Luffy bursts back into the room, Sanji on his heels with a bowl in hand. “Back off you idiot, how many times do I have to tell you — Ed! My darling, how are you?” Sanji coos, prancing over and seating himself in the chair Chopper had vacated what feels like a lifetime ago.

“Uh,” I say unintelligently.

Luffy frowns, clamouring into the bed in the space where my legs leave room and shuffling around until he’s comfortable, like a dog. “You alright?”

“I think I just had a formative moment. I don’t know how many more of these shocks I can take to this heart of mine before it fucking gives out,” I mutter, raking my hands through my hair.

“...Alright then. Anyway, I brought you baked apple slices because I know you love them so much,” Sanji says brightly. “Next time we stop at an island with a decent market, I’ll make you some kind of peach dessert, how does that sound?”

“Brilliant! I love you so much,” I cheer, taking the bowl and trying to grab the fork with… less than stellar results. “This is fucking infuriating. If Chopper can’t fix this shit, I’m *rioting.”*

“Let me,” Sanji says brightly, swiping the fork and shovelling some apple onto it. “Say ‘ah!’”

I let him feed me, because honestly I think he might cry if I refuse. And because I want my damn apple slices. I fuckin’ love apple slices. “You’re so fucking good at balancing the cinnamon,” I mumble around a mouthful. “It always turned out shit when I made it for myself.”

“You really aren’t a fair comparison when it comes to the difficulty of making a meal,” Sanji says gently.

“Ok — I’m capable of making *some* foods. Don’t spread this false narrative that I’m useless in the kitchen,” I argue.

Luffy makes an unsure sound. “I mean… the toast…”

“Shaddup,” I mutter, cheeks going hot. “I’m goddamn incredible at making scrambled eggs, so there. Can you make scrambled eggs? Yeah I thought not.”

“Respectfully, the day I let you cook scrambled eggs in my kitchen is the day I die,” Sanji says slowly. “I say that with love, of course.”

“You shits,” I grumble, swallowing the last mouthful of my dessert. “God, that was good. Thanks, angel eyes.”

“Of course, my darling,” he sings.

“So why did you have the look when we came in here? The one where you look like your brain is working,” Luffy asks.

I give him a grin. “Because I had a pretty damn good idea with this working brain of mine.” I toss the coin in the air and catch it. “Say, how would you feel about meeting a few other big shot pirates?”

Chapter End Notes

Also known as; idiots who don't understand a lick of Latin play Latin translator to... indeterminate levels of success.

Fun fact; I've got a super rare super fun version of myotonia called paramyotonia congenita and it super sucks ass! :D Typing when it's cold is incredibly hard! Going down stairs is always a gamble! Sometimes I cannot swallow or speak without sounding incredibly drunk! We love having a neuromuscular disease ✌ Living in Canada with this thing is a nightmare because it's cold here like 70% of the time. Thanks mom! Thanks dead grandpa! Your genes have FUCKED ME OVER!

Win! You finally get a description of the coin with a bunch of Lore™! Loss. There is still no art of the coin.

Chapter 98: Chapter Ninety Eight: A Champagne Supernova In The Sky

Chapter Summary

> *Champagne Supernova - Oasis*
>
> “If it’s any consolation, only one of them has a bounty higher than Luffy’s,” I offer. “And that’s only because he murders civilians like it’s going out of style.”

Chapter Notes

> I goofed too hard and this is nearly 5k. I miss having self control.
>
> It's been such a *week*. I'm recovering from that fucking cold but the transition of going back on my medication, even though I was only off them a few days, has been awful and I have not gone to sleep before 5 AM in a week. I am beginning to hate the sound of birds outside my window.
>
> Loving how all the reactions last chapter were 'I'm not smart enough for this' 'I don't know Latin' and 'I'm sure this will make sense later.' Like y'all are so real for that. In my defense I'm on my 65 day streak of leaning Latin on Duolingo and need an excuse to make it worth it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Now I’m not saying they’ll say yes,” I caution. “Plus we would need a meeting place, and some of these folks are… rather rowdy and high maintenance.”

“I don’t really give a shit about other people,” Luffy says bluntly. “But if you wanna meet ‘em, that’s cool.”

“Aren’t these guys, like, super dangerous?” Usopp squeaks, peeking over Nami’s shoulder.

Those two — plus Luffy, Chopper and Zoro — have gathered around while I lay out my idea. Chopper had put a hard cap on my visitor limit, only half the Strawhats allowed. I wave out the window at where Brook and Sanji are both moping, trying to stare in.

"If it's any consolation, only one of them has a bounty higher than Luffy's," I offer. "And that's only because he murders civilians like it's going out of style."

Usopp nearly passes out and Nami swiftly switches places with him so he's in front. "You want us to consort with a murderer?!" she shrieks. I silently point to myself, then Zoro. "That's different!"

"You never know how useful connections like these may be once we're in the New World, an ally in even one of these people could be the difference between life and death," I point out. "And I doubt they're *all* murderers — I still gotta call my guy and get their posters for you guys," I murmur.

"Maybe do that first, then we'll decide whether these people are worth meeting and making nice with," Zoro suggests dryly. "Plus, do you really wanna meet a bunch of strong people while you're like *that?"* he questions, waving a vague hand at my everything.

"I'm not taking criticism from a man who won't even keep his bandages on," I say, a pointed finger brandished at him accusingly.

"They're right, you know," Chopper mutters under his breath.

"But yeah, I'll get that done now," I say over Zoro's grumbling. "Now out, shoo, begone." There's a chorus of goodbyes, then it's just Luffy hovering at the door. "What's up? You know you won't be able to sit still through my entire call," I tease.

"I know, I just missed you," he says with a sweet smile, melting my heart before slipping out and closing the door behind him. I fucking *love* that guy.

Back by myself, I dial up Jonah's number on the Transponder.

There's barely a beat of it ringing before the call picks up. I open my mouth to greet him, but a flurry of noise interrupts me. There's a clatter of many somethings falling, then Jonah's voice comes through.

"—Shit, sorry yeah, I gotta take this, haha. No, no worries, sorry about your pens — yup haha duty calls. No, yeah I'll catch you later — oh don't worry about it, it's fine, haha yeah. Yup, yeah, gotta go, haha—"

I blink stupidly at the snail and it's twitching smile. Then there's the sounds of a door slamming. "Um," I say shortly.

"Holy *shit* Ed, where the fuck have you been?" Jonah demands, voice equal parts exhausted, relieved, and pissed off.

"Uh. Around," I say lamely. "What was that about?"

"I knocked Grant's pen holder thing over when the Transponder started ringing. Nevermind that — why did it take you so long to call me?! I need to yell at you about the whole Enies Lobby thing!" he snaps.

Oh right. I forgot to call him after that. Haha, oops.

"Right. How's Fergus?" I say with an awkward laugh.

"Oh he's *great, swell* actually," he sneers. "Do you have any idea how badly I *lost my shit* when I went into work the morning after you allegedly *destroyed the Judicial Island,* which I only found out *days later,* only for Fergus to ask me if there was any paperwork that had to be filed because he gave information to my *CP agent?!"*

“Well we didn’t actually destroy the island, if that’s any consolation,” I offer weakly. “They kinda did it themselves.”

“NOT THE POINT,” Jonah says loudly before lowering his voice. “The point is that Fergus is doing amazing, in fact he was ecstatic at the prospect that he accidentally made himself an accessory to treason. He finds espionage very fun and has absolutely zero qualms about betraying the World Government.”

Ah. Hadn’t thought about that part. “Oops?”

There’s a bunch of yelling out on deck. I lean forward to peek out the window and can’t really see what’s going on.

“I wish I was being sarcastic, but I’m not. Frankly it was so easy for him to switch sides I think we did the Marines a favour,” Jonah grumbles.

“I love how I’ve somehow radicalized you to the point you think of us as a unit, it wasn’t *me* turning Fergus to the dark side, it was a team effort,” I snicker, switching my attention back to him.

“Shut the fuck up. I’m still mad,” he snarls though the snail, its face trying desperately not to curl into a smile.

“If you were so upset, why not call me first? It’s not like you don’t have my number,” I ask.

“I’m at Marineford — those rumours about my unit’s transfer were true, and immediate. I can’t afford to make an outgoing call to an unknown number here, but you calling first from a secure line establishes you as a safe number, or something. I don’t know, I’m not up to date on Transponder protocol, but figured I better not risk it,” he explains.

I frown. “Marineford, huh?”

“It’s fucking crazy here. Marineford is *crazy* ,” he complains. “The whole upper echelon are up in arms with each other going back and forth between Marie Jois and in talks about a new Warlord — which is also your fault, I know it is, fuck what the papers said. No way you asking for Crocodile’s bounty had nothing to do with him going to Impel Down not even a week later.”

I blink twice. “Oh! Yeah that was us. I forgot the official story was that Smoker got his ass — Yeah, Luffy beat the shit out of Croc. Good times.”

“You fucking people,” he mutters under his breath.

There’s another bout of screaming outside. What are those bozos up to?

“Wait, you said they’re in talks about the new Warlord?” I say, doing a double take. “Just talks?”

“Yeah, as far as I know no one has been inaugurated yet,” he says, eyes shifting off to the side with a grimace.

“What’s that look for?” I say trepidatiously. That did not look good.

“Well… I only say this because you asked about his crew a while back, but I overheard something about Blackbeard being considered. And I mean considered *heavily,”* he says slowly. “He apparently had a representative and everything.”

“God-fucking-*damnit* can that son of a bitch stop causing me problems for a single minute?” I grumble, scowling and biting on my thumbnail before I pause. “But they’re just talking about letting him in. He doesn’t have the position.”

Ace is fine. Ace is *fine.*

“Er — yeah. They could still go with someone else I guess, I don’t really know any specifics since all I’ve got is gossip. Frankly I wouldn’t be upset if they never appointed a new one, or just got rid of them all together. I had to walk past Bartholomew Kuma in the hall the other day,” Jonah pauses to shiver, *“scary.* And he was being chewed out by the fucking *Fleet Admiral* for being late! Marineford is ***crazy.”***

I can’t help but burst out laughing. “Hey now, Kuma seemed nice enough when I met him! After the nearly killing us thing. I mean, *maybe* he’s the reason I can barely move, but it is what it is. And it’s low-key totally my fault he was late.”

Jonah makes this hilarious groan/moan/screech thing. I missed this dude.

I roll my shoulders. “But I did, as always, actually call to extort information out of you.”

“Of course you did,” Jonah says, muffled through his hand. “What is it this time?”

“I need the bounties and any information you’ve got on the nine other Supernovas bound for Sabaody,” I lay out.

“Of course you do,” he mutters. “I’m gonna open the paper in a few days and you’re gonna be front page news for killing them all and taking their crews captive.”

“God no,” I deny. “I’m not planning any of their murders. Yet.”

“‘Yet’ they say. Fuck you,” he says with an incredulous chuckle. “Ok — that guy I mentioned earlier, Chief Petty Officer Grant, his desk is right beside mine here. He’s fucking annoying and is apparently waiting on his new office to finish painting or something, so we’re stuck with him. Just… try to act professional, will you?”

“I’m always professional,” I say, very professionally.

The snail stares at me in silence for a long moment. There's more yelling on the deck.

"Aren't you a Master Chief Petty Officer? Don't you outrank him? Just tell him to fuck off," I say conversationally, ignoring my idiots and moving on from this slight to my pride.

"You're unbelievable," Jonah scoffs. "Not yet, I'm still just a Petty Officer. As far as I know, it's gonna be a couple weeks until my promotion," he grumbles.

"Ew," I say sympathetically. "There's gotta be someone who outranks his ass though, right? Go above his head. You got a fun new boss?"

"Yeah, this guy named Commodore Jean-Rousseau. He seems nice enough, he showed me and Fergus a secret passage to the dining hall because they're just too many fucking people here to go through the main halls," he explains. "It's actually kind of crazy how many secret paths there are in this place."

"I'm going to use that information for evil," I tell him.

The snail's face pinches like Jonah is massaging his nose bridge. "I just can't even…" he mutters under his breath. "Ok. I'm getting your shit, *behave."*

There's the sounds of a door opening, then some walking, then another voice and face is taking over the snail. "Ah, you're back. Good call?"

"Still on it. I just need to access some files and such," Jonah answers, none of the usual sass in his voice. Ew, he sounds polite. I don't like it.

"Is that so? What do you need?" the guy asks. I don't think I like him either.

“No, don’t worry about it, I can get everything myself,” Jonah replies, voice still polite, but I can hear an edge of… exasperation?

The guy hums uncertainty. “You sure? That’s the ‘CP agent’ your men like to joke about, isn’t it?” Yeah I don’t like him. “You could use all the help you can get, right?”

“That’s fine. I know how to do my job,” Jonah says with a smile, the corner of his lip twitching in time with his eye.

Gram or whatever his name was makes another uncertain noise.

“Petty Officer, what’s the hold up?” I ask, voice as stern as I can make it.

The snail blinks slowly at me. “Uh. No hold up, sir.” Do I detect a hint of sass in there at last?

“Good. You’re usually so punctual,” I comment. “I hope a change of location hasn’t dulled your capabilities. I *do* single you out for a reason.”

“Of course not,” Jonah murmurs. There’s a tap as the Transponder is placed on a desk, then the shuffling of papers.

“So this is the CP agent?” Grass or whatever asks, taking over the Transponder with his voice much clearer.

I make a face. “Presumptuous, speaking to me so casually. And lacking in manners as well,” I say distastefully. The snail’s face twinges red and the guy's mouth ticks down into a frown. “Who’s this, then? Name and rank,” I demand, voice imperious.

The guy blinks twice. “Er — Chief Petty Officer Grant, sir,” he answers, tone changing from curious to tight.

I sound an unimpressed hum. “Awfully blasé for infantry. And I assume you have a good reason for waylaying my Officer?”

“Er — My apologies, that wasn’t my intention,” he mutters awkwardly, features scrunching.

“Yes, I’m sure it wasn’t,” I say dismissively. The guy frowns harder. “Officer, have you found everything?”

“Excuse me,” Jonah mumbles before his face is taking over the snail, mouth pinched from biting down a smirk. “Yes, sir. It was just the Supernova bounties and relevant information, correct? I have the nine you requested.”

“Phenomenal. Perfect as always,” I praise with a wink. “You never fail to impress.”

“I do my best,” Jonah sighs, shaking his head with a smile. “I’ll get these sent over immediately. Have a good day, sir.”

“You too, and do try to not let people distract you next time,” I tease. “It’s below your station.”

Jonah rolls his eyes, then ends the call.

I sit still for a moment before bursting into cackles, back bowing and sending pain through my spine. “I cannot keep getting away with impersonating Marines like this, this can’t keep working!” I wheeze to myself, smacking my hand down on the comforter.

_____

“Ed! You’ve got mail!” Luffy hollers, bursting into my room and startling me from where I’m writing shit down.

“Sweet shit, a warning next time!” I yell, shaking a fist at him.

He skips across the room and throws himself onto the bed, passing me a large packet and batting his eyes. “Sorry. You’re not gonna believe what you missed! I got to go in the shark sub, it was really awesome, and there’s a mermaid on the deck and we’re gonna go rescue her kidnapped friend from like a flying fish or something — I wasn’t really paying attention. But! There’s takoyaki!” he explains rapidly.

I blink a couple of times. Sweet shit, are we there already?

“I missed getting to go in the shark sub?” I ask in dismay. “And you know I’m always down for takoyaki, who cares if we gotta beat up some fish.”

“You’re not allowed to beat up any fish,” he says solemnly. “But! I’ll punch one for you!”

I hang my head. I forgot I wasn’t allowed to move. “Better be a good fucking punch,” I lament.

“Speaking of fish, Camie — that’s the mermaid — she can talk to fish! It was sooooo cool, they made this arrow that we’re following!” he continues.

I furrow my brow. “She can talk to fish?” I forgot mermaids could do that. Wait — I look down at what I have scrawled across my notepad. “Weird question, do you think she could get fish to deliver mail?”

Luffy tilts his head back and forth. “Hmmm, maybe? I mean the paper would get wet, and fish don’t have hands, but you’re smart so you could figure it out.”

I laugh and pat his cheek. “Thanks, darlin’.

An explosion suddenly rocks the ship. Luffy tumbles forward and onto my legs and I yelp as he nearly bends my knee backwards. “Woah! What was that?” Luffy gasps, scrambling off me with an apologetic look.

“LUFFY! THEY’RE HERE!” Usopp screams from outside.

“Uh oh. Gotta go! I’ll be back later!” Luffy hollers, jumping off the bed and sprinting out the door. “WHERE ARE THEY?! LEMME AT ‘EM!”

I stare at the door with dead eyes and an open mouth. “Alright. Sure.”

I turn back to what I’m writing and frown. I switch my focus to the packet and realize there’s a second much slimmer envelope on top of it. I start with that one, pulling the two sheets of paper inside it out and staring at the sketched mockup of the coin.

I see what Iceberg meant now, about the mint marks and punctuation. Is that bad design, or done intentionally? The other sheet of paper just has *Here you are, Ed. Best of luck!* scrawled out with Iceberg’s signature at the bottom.

I put the papers back into the envelope and set it aside. The door swings open again and Luffy flounces back in. “The fish guys ran away!” he announces.

I raise a single eyebrow. “Did they, now?”

He nods and leans forward to see what it is I have written down. “What’re ya working on?”

I slide the notepad out from where it’s half lodged under the packet and angle it towards him. “I figure the best way to get all the Supernovas to agree to meet with us is to appeal to them all in ways specific to what I know about them. This one is for Basil Hawkins, they call him

the magician." I reach up and flick the edge of his hat. "He's got the Straw Straw Fruit, and is all around a fairly creepy dude."

"So how are you gonna convince him?" Luffy asks, scrunching up his nose.

"Play to his mysticism," I answer. "Tell him it's fate that's lead to this meeting. I wanted to make a cryptic reference to tarot cards, but it's been a really long time since I was into that and I can't remember how I would communicate what I want to say."

He nods slowly. "Ok. And the others?"

I let my mouth quirk up into a smile. "I've only written one so far. Eustass Kid. It says we have a cyborg who's the coolest damn thing ever. Oh, and that he's a pussy if he doesn't come."

Luffy bursts out laughing. The door cracks open once again and Chopper peeks his head inside. "Luffy, we're here. Ed, don't move," he orders.

I roll my eyes and give him a salute. Luffy hoots and goes scampering to the deck. "Bye Ed! I'll be back! I'll hit that fish for you this time!"

The door swings closed yet again. I'm alone with my thoughts and paper. Yet again.

I'm starting to dislike this being left out thing.

It's not even that I want to go fit the fish, or Duval or whatever that mask wearing weirdo is called, I just… Well. I guess you never really stop feeling guilty when you're not contributing. I can hear the voices of my crew clear in my head already, berating me for even thinking that sitting still and healing could be burdensome in any way.

I can also hear their voices loud and clear through the door as they finally figure out exactly who Hatchan is. I roll my eyes heavenward and settle in tighter to finish what I'd started.

Eight letters. Eight different ways to convince the Supernovas to congregate.

One; Eustass Kid and Killer. They basically come as a package deal, so one letter is all that's needed between them. Where Kid goes, Killer will follow. And like I said, cyborgs and good old fashion goading. That's all it'll take.

Two; Basil Hawkins. Mysticism and fate, something vague about the stars wanting us to meet. Good enough.

Three; X Drake. I'm just gonna tell this motherfucker like it is. All the Supernovas in one place will be far too good an opportunity in information gathering for a Marine spy to pass up. If nothing else, he'll come just to see what kind of stunt I'm trying to pull.

Four; Trafalgar Law. All I really do for his is sign my name with a flourish, my special little self-chosen initial given all the pomp and emphasis it deserves. I also tuck the Aqua Laguna commemorative coin into the envelope, though not before making sure I have ample record of it written down, just as a token of goodwill.

Five; Jewelry Bonney. Honestly? I just say we've got takoyaki. Nuff said. Once she's here, I've just gotta mention that we've met Kuma and that's hook line and sinker.

Six; Capone Bege. I make sure everything is worded as respectfully as I can with his. I send a silent apology to Nami and Sanji and shamelessly offer three of our finest bottles of wine I know for a fact are squirrelled away deep in our hold; for Sanji's fanciest dishes and Nami's fanciest moods. A deal and an apology for how… uncouth this will doublessly become all in one.

Seven; Urouge. Unfortunately, I barely know fuck all about this guy. I lay it out as it stands, a meeting for the Supernovas and a chance to drink and break bread before we all move to the next stage of our journey. I hope that's sufficient.

Eight; Scratchmen Apoo. A meeting of Supernovas is a story he won't pass up, and a promise for at least the Strawhats share of them posing for a picture (singular — I don't think Zoro will stand for more than one) only sweetens the deal. And beyond that, we have a nearly 80 year old musician and master of his craft and I've got a harmonica somewhere in my bag, so jamming is optional.

The minutiae and basic outlines for each is essentially the same; a location is yet to be determined so I'll have to add that later, but rules like 'don't murder each other' and 'leave your crews on your ships pls' and 'we WILL charge for destruction of property' are consistent across each.

I write all this completely ignoring the copious amounts of explosions right outside. The harsh jerk, followed by a harsher jerk, of the ship is pretty fucking annoying when it makes me fuck up a letter to the point of having to rewrite it, but honestly working through a full-scale fight isn't that hard.

I look up from my work with a dead stare. I don't *want* to be used to working through full-scale fights goddamnit.

When Luffy staggers through the door, I've already finished up all my letters, only needing to add a location before they're ready to be sent. I eye my Captain over the edge of the envelope I've carefully scrawled a name on as he drops to his knees at my bedside.

"Ed," he says, voice breathy and nearly a whisper. "The most amazing thing happened."

"Uh. Ok," I respond, adding the envelope to my completed stack and moving to the next one.

"This… this changes everything…" he hisses quietly. "I never knew…"

"Luffy, paramour mine, start making sense or I'm getting up to smack you," I sigh, dragging my pen across the paper in a fluid and practiced movement.

“There was a great light,” he says wistfully, eyes distant and wet. “It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ll give you till the count of three, then I’m breaking doctors orders,” I say blandly.

Luffy slowly rises to his feet, reaching out to grasp my hands as I finish writing. I glance from his hands to his face with a raised eyebrow. He bows his head and takes a deep breath before it’s jerking upwards with real actual literal stars shining through his eyes.

“THE SUNNY HAS A CANNON AND IT WAS THE COOLEST THING I’VE EVER SEEN AND IT CAME OUT OF ITS *MOUTH—”*

I jerk back at the volume of his words, blinking rapidly as he leans in and just keeps fucking going. He rants about *exactly* how cool it was and how *amazing* it looked and how *insane* Franky is for making it. I feel myself going cross-eyed as he just keeps going and going.

Finally, he appears to run out of words, mouth flapping open and closed with his gaze directed into the distance and a reverent look in his eyes. “You know what it was?” he says, words so pronounced it feels like gravity bends towards him at their importance. Luffy looks me square in my fucking eyes and says words that could damn a lesser man to hell. “It was *yeet swag.”*

I take a deep breath. I let the breath out. For good measure I do it twice more. I count to ten, then backwards down. I close my eyes, open them again, then scream as loud as I can manage right in his face.

Luffy doesn’t even blink. When I finish screaming, he just nods at me solemnly. “I *know,* right?”

If I was a lesser man, I would burst into tears.

The door slams open and the entire crew tries to barge through it at once, all shouting some kind of concern or demand to know where the enemy is in unison.

I disconnect one hand from Luffy and raise it in a wave. “Hey guys. Good fight?” I ask calmly.

Yeah they take a while to stop being mad.

_____

“Chopper, I am formally requesting medical permission to be moved to the deck temporarily,” I announce once everyone stops yelling at me and Luffy.

“No,” he rebuffs immediately, before he blinks. “Why?”

“I would like to speak with our guests, and this room is too small for us all,” I say diplomatically, gesturing to the cramped space. I really don’t know how we’re all fitting in here right now.

Chopper’s nose scrunches and he hums.

“C’mon Chopper, fresh air will be good for them!” Luffy whines, perched in the free space on my bed beside Usopp.

Chopper’s hum gets higher.

“I won’t sneak off to the bathroom by myself in the middle of the night without assistance if you say yes,” I bargain.

“You were going to do that,” Chopper mutters, not phrasing it like a question. I, diplomatically, keep my mouth shut.

“I think we can all be responsible and not injure Ed further while they’re outside,” Robin says politely. To even have Robin on my side in this endeavour… what a life.

Chopper taps his hoove against his nose twice, then sighs. “Fine. But no moving! You stay in a deck chair the whole time, and you don’t move an *inch!”* he demands.

I nod eagerly. “Done and done. On your brilliant orders, doctor, sir!”

“FLATTERY WON’T GET YOU ANYWHERE STUPIDHEAD—”

———

So I get set up in a deck chair.

Camie, the starfish (Potpourri? Pappag..?) and Hatchan all wait politely until I’m settled in before waving their hello’s.

“Yo,” I greet, head turned to the mermaid and the starfish. “Sorry I didn’t come to meet you sooner, I was a little preoccupied.”

“Oh, no worries,” Camie says brightly. “It’s nice to meet you!”

“That sweater is a fashion travesty,” the starfish says instead of anything else. I ignore him.

I pin the octopus fishman with a sharp stare. “Pleasure to meet you again, Hatchan. Or, to meet you formally this time.” My words are not harsh or biting, but they do make him shrink

in on himself a little.

“Uh. Yes. Hi,” he squeezes out.

I give Nami a sidelong glance. She gives him a cursory sweep, then ever so slightly inclines her head at me with a resigned eye roll. I look back to Hatchan and give him a smile. “I hear you’re quite the takoyaki chef. I hope you can back that up.”

He blinks harshly at the tone shift, but then nods his head furiously. “I’ll endeavor to be up to your standards!”

I laugh, leaning on one of my chair’s armrests. “Relax, I’m just fucking with you. I do have a question for you folks, though.”

Hatchan’s shoulders relax from where they hitched up to his ears. Camie tilts her head to the side with a wide-eyed blink. “What’s your question?”

“I’m trying to set up a meeting with some big name pirates. I need a caterer, a venue and a mail delivery service. Think you’re up to the task?” I ask, smile broad as I hold up my stack of letters.

The sea dwellers all blink at me for a moment. “Oh. Oh! Yes! Yes we could do that!” Hatchan agrees quickly, head bobbing up and down eagerly.

“I can ask some fish to send your mail, if you’d like! They could give your guests instructions on how to find us!” Camie says brightly.

“Oh, wait — how many people?” Hatchan asks.

“Nine. And space for their ships,” I say mildly.

“Oh,” Hatchan says again. “I don’t think the takoyaki stand is big enough for that.”

“I think I have a solution for you!” a voice says, carrying loudly across the water. We all turn in its direction and I blink slowly at the large blond man eating up sea water in our direction on the back of a giant water buffalo.

“What the shit,” I vocalize, squinting at this man and his creepy ass face. “How the fuck did he hear that from there.”

“You need more space? I, handsome — that’s not right. I, Duval, offer you this as thanks!” he announces, slowly to a halt beside the ship. “Black Leg, sir! After you smashed my face up and I woke up like this, I was stunned! You’ve made me so handsome! My life is looking all peachy and rosy now! If you’d like to use the base of the Rosy Life Riders for your meeting, we’d be more than happy to oblige!”

What the fuck is happening with his face. Why is it doing that when he winks. What the fuck.

I stare at him for a long moment. His cheeks turn pink. “This is a little embarrassing… but if you insist on a kiss as well, I shall not decline,” he says humbly. I stare longer.

“Right,” I say slowly. I turn back to my notes and swiftly scrawl out the location and instructions to follow the fish on each of them, then stuff them into their envelopes and turn to Usopp. “How many waterproof canisters do we have?”

Usopp blinks slowly at me. “Uh. Enough for this.”

I nod, smile sharpening. “Great. Then I say we gather up some pirates, and have ourselves a little bit of a party.”

Chapter End Notes

Good god I missed Jonah. I love that guy. Anywhere here's a bunch of art of him (and a few of Fergus) because I miiiiiiisssssed hiiiiiim. Catch me in the corner hitting everyone with the twinky alt beam because who tf is gonna stop me?

Adding that 'don't bring your crew' addendum because y'all, I know you like some of their crewmates but Jesus Christ I am not going to be able to keep track of that many fucking characters in one setting. Do you hate me? Huh? Is that it? Didn't think so.

Also presenceofdarkness who does the podfic made an eyecatcher for Ed and its the coolest thing ever, even if you don't listen to the podfic you gotta hear this thing, it's incredible.

Chapter 99: Chapter Ninety Nine: Red Wine Supernova

Chapter Summary

Red Wine Supernova - Chappell Roan

“I’m thinking I wait and hit them with the full force of my sexy collarbones, shoulders and tits when it feels like they’re about to go to war with each other,” I joke. “You think my tits could stop wars? Huh, Nami? Could they?”

Chapter Notes

Life update! I am mental. Jokes, I just have a ridiculous sleep schedule and am getting ass blasted by my medication symptoms.

Anyway Clancy came out and I have been unwell since, Tyler Joseph when I got my hands on you — That is to say Snap Back hit my psyche in ways I did not in fact know it could be hit. If you haven't listened to the album go do that. Bitches love twenty one pilots. It's me I'm bitches.

Damn... I am just slightly taller much hotter middle school me..... I'm back to having glasses and everything..... we are all just infinite reflections of who we have always been.....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Usopp asks for the fourth time.

“If I’m honest this time and say it probably isn’t, will you shit your pants?” I ask mildly, stretching my arms over my head and sighing when my back cracks.

“It’s a bad idea,” Chopper says gloomily, eyes trained on me like a bug under a microscope. “Any idea with you on your feet is a bad one.”

I do a little dance move just to make him nervous. “Chopper, honey, I feel fine. You need to chill out.”

Chopper scowls at me, but says no more.

After a nice sit down takoyaki meal while we waited for my messages to be delivered, I'm in half the pain I was in this morning and half the bandages. I bend my knees and twist around my ankles, thankful they aren't wrapped up anymore even though Chopper had insisted on some knee compression sleeves I have in hand. My arms and a vast majority of my torso are still mummified, but at least my head is free.

I squint over the side of the ship at the half-destroyed base our makeshift party is going to be held on, and wave back at Franky when he waves to me. He's helping (forcing. He is forcing them) the Rosy Life Riders to clean up the debris and destroyed hut things all over the place while Duval just stands there checking himself out in a mirror. To each their own, I guess?

The rest of the crew are spread around making some kind of preparation or other. I mean, Nami has holed up in the girls room to do some therapeutic sewing because she nearly worked herself into a panic, but she's fine.

Speaking of, though…

"I'm gonna go change, this really isn't party attire," I say, jerking my thumb up at the stairs.

"You stumble even a *millimeter* and I'm tying you to a chair," Chopper threatens. I stick my tongue out at him and leave, doing a bullshit salute with the compression sleeves.

I don't trip on the stairs, thank fucking god, but it gets pretty damn close. I do, however, nearly trip walking through the threshold of the cabin. I catch myself on the back of the door, closing it just loud enough it sounds like a toddler slammed it.

Nami jumps from where she's sat at the desk, leaping to her feet and holding her hands behind her. "Hey Ed! What brings you in here?" she says quickly.

I stare at her for a moment, because I definitely heard her saying *"shit shit shit shit shit—"* under her breath as I entered. "Nami, sweetheart, you are dogshit at lying. At least to me."

Her face twists up. "Hahahahah, what would I be lying about? And no I'm not!"

I stare at her for another long second. "Whatcha got there?" I ask, gesturing to whatever she's concealing behind her back.

Nami's face goes white, then red, then back to white. "Uh. Yaknow. Stuff," she says, eyes focusing on a spot above the door instead of anywhere near me.

I raise an eyebrow. "Uh huh. Stuff. You wanna tell me what kind of stuff?"

Her whole face twitches for a moment, then her lip starts trembling and she makes a sound of despair. She starts walking towards me, mouth moving a mile a minute. "I'm really sorry Ed I didn't even realize what I was doing until it was too late and I know this was important to you because it's one of the few pieces of clothing you haven't fucking obliterated without fixing but it was on the chair with the other old things I was using for patches and if it's any consolation I evened out what I cut and hemmed it so it's still usable even if it's cropped—"

I blink slowly, barely processing half of what she's saying until she's thrusting what she's holding into my hands. I stare down at the worn yellow plaid fabric, so familiar even as I hold it up and note the missing foot and a half of fabric off the bottom.

"Nami," I say slowly. "When I left home, I had nothing but the clothes on my back. Of that clothing the pants have had their knees blown out, my shoes got incinerated, I think I left my unmentionables on Drum and can only hope Doctorine burned them, and this was the last of it." Nami makes a wounded noise, but I keep going. "This shirt was my grandfathers." I lower it so I can see her face. She looks like she's about to burst into fucking tears as I fold it over my arm. "He was a cool fucking dude, I think he could approve of the cropped look."

Nami blinks back the tears as her hands shake. "Really?"

I nod with a smile. “Yup. I also had his old leather jacket, but I couldn’t exactly grab it before I… left.” I fucking miss that jacket, it was cool as hell.

“So… so you aren’t mad?” she asks, clasping her hands together with hope shining in her eyes.

I laugh. “No, Nami, I’m not mad. Honestly it’s my fault for putting it on the chair. Now, you wanna help me with these stupid compression sleeves? I am *not* going to be able to get these up my damn legs.”

———

“Does this fuck? I feel like this fucks,” I say, twisting around and looking at my outfit.

“Yeah, it fucks,” Nami agrees.

I settled on a pair of mustard coloured shorts that go past where the knee compression sleeves start and one of those fucken sleeveless turtleneck crop tops — the slut shirt, you know what I mean. I do up almost all the buttons on the flannel and roll the sleeves up my forearms.

“I’m thinking I wait and hit them with the full force of my sexy collarbones, shoulders and tits when it feels like they’re about to go to war with each other,” I joke. “You think my tits could stop wars? Huh, Nami? Could they?”

Nami belts a laugh. “Definitely. Hey, uh. I — er — I got these, and I know they aren’t exactly a jacket, and they really don’t make up for accidentally cutting up your shirt, but…” she slowly fumbles through her words, holding out a pair of fingerless leather gloves.

I take them with a big genuine smile. “Thank you, Nami,” I say sincerely, tugging them on and twisting my ring over the material so it sits on top. I strike a pose, attempting to vogue. “So? Scale of 1-10, how hard does it fuck?”

She lets loose another cackle. “Solid 10. You’re making me feel underdressed now, should I change too? Do we have time?”

“Ed! Someone is here!” Usopp screams from outside.

Me and Nami exchange a look. “Guess not,” I sigh. “As the shit fucketh.”

“As the shit fucketh,” Nami repeats dejectedly.

We both make our way onto the deck and I flick my spyglass open to train my eye on the distance. It’s a distinctive ship cutting through the seas towards us, doublemasted and with a sail that proudly proclaims its allegiance. That, plus the giant fucken dinosaur skull it’s got for a figurehead.

“Who is that?” Nami mutters beside me.

“That,” I say, passing her my spyglass, “is Captain Eustass Kid, professional cunt.”

“Should we make landfall? Keep the footing more even,” Nami suggests, frowning as she lowers my spyglass.

I’m gonna have to be a diplomat and a million other roles to pull this off. *For every stranger, a mask.* Or at least that’s how that stupid child psychologist worded whatever it was I told her how I viewed meeting new people.

Usopp is standing beside the ramp onto the base, weight shifting from one foot to the other and arms poised and twitching like he can’t decide whether to run for his life or not. “Why are we doing this again? Why would you ever think this was a good idea,” he weeps.

“You can hide on the ship if you wanna, Usopp,” I say brightly, clapping him on the shoulder as we pass. He makes more blubbering noises, but follows dutifully.

The ship is closer and clearer once we’re standing on solid ground. It’s Zoro who steps up shoulder to shoulder with me, arms crossed and a frown on his face, that points out the obvious. “This guy is gonna be a real asshat, isn’t he.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Most definitely.”

A red blob appears at the top of the ship and shouts something.

“What did he say?” Nami asks.

“That was way too fucking Scottish to be comprehensible,” I deadpan. “Just out of idle curiosity, is there a Glasglow in the South Blue?”

“Er — not that I know of,” she mutters.

His entrance is… well it’s an entrance. The Victoria Punk pulls up right beside our ship, parking at an angle that would get it one of those ‘try colouring inside the lines, idiot’ passive aggressive colouring pages on its windshield if it was a car. Their ramp slams down onto the ground right at our feet.

Kid is an imposing figure as he descends towards us, tall and made large by a big red and black fur coat. His red hair is sticking up in a gravity defying style I’m loath to admit is quite impressive, partially held up by the pair of goggles strapped to his forehead. He’s also wearing the ugliest pants known to man and his whole tiddies are on display, so there’s that.

“Your ship is so fucking rad,” I say instead of a greeting. Good god he’s taller up close, I have to crane my neck to see his face. Fucking Christ he’s a whole foot taller than me. Oh god.

Eustass Kid raises his brow bone, since he has no actual eyebrows, and tilts his head. “Aye, I know,” he says, voice low and gravelly and undeniably Scottish. “Are you the little cocksucker who called me a pussy?”

I give him a sunny smile I make sure includes my teeth. “Nope. You showed up, so I’ve called no one a pussy. Between us, only you’ve used genital terms to describe the other.”

He scoffs. “Right. Your bullshite invitation looked like it was scribed by a damn animal, you’ll have to excuse yourself if your semantics don’t land.”

My entire face twitches. Nami pinches the back of my arm hard. “You’ll have to forgive me, I thought you’d be smart enough to figure it out. My apologies if god didn’t bless you with a brain big enough to comprehend the written word,” I bite out, smile still firmly in place.

“Ed,” Nami hisses, pinching me again. Usopp whimpers. Zoro smothers a snicker with a cough.

Kid’s eyes stay hard as his red-lined mouth splits into a sneer of a grin. “What was that, shrimp? You wanna chat about brains? By the size of you, yours can’t be bigger than a pea. Where's your Captain, short stack. You aren’t worth my time.”

“Probably eating. Can’t guarantee it’s peas, however. Though you must know all about those,” I deliberately flicker my eyes down to his fugly fucking pants and specifically what they’re concealing, “right?”

“What was that, you bite-sized boot licker?!” he snarls, taking one big step off the ramp and onto the base.

“You heard me, you limp dick ass clown. What, did you get too much powder in your ears when you were playing with mommy’s makeup? Or did you just hit your head too hard crawling out the closet of the blind hooker who you stole those pants from?!” I snap back, leaning toward him with my teeth bared in a wide smile.

“ED!” Nami hisses again, louder this time. I think Usopp might burst into tears. Zoro’s snort is barely concealed at all.

“HAH?! I’M NOT TAKING LIP FROM A SKEEVY LITTLE BIMBO NOT EVEN WORTH *HALF* MY BOUNTY!” Kid yells, looking a few seconds from launching at my throat.

I, having no self preservation instincts, keep going. “YEAH?! WELL YOU DON'T HAVE ANY EYEBROWS, SO SHUT THE FUCK UP—"

A hand clamps down on Kid’s shoulder as he goes to lunge at me. “Kid. We didn’t come here to fight.” From behind the redheaded dickbag comes another man. My first thought is *damn bitch he is **way** smaller than I remember him.*

Killer is in the same mask from my memories, but he’s much slimmer in the shoulders than his post-timeskip counterpart. His blond hair is a wild mess of curls that extends nearly past his knees. He’s wearing a black and white polka-dotted button up, left nearly all the way unbuttoned, and a pair of blue riding chaps.

“Massacre Soldier Killer,” I greet, face settling back into a mild look. “Pleasure to meet you, I apologise for my poor manners.”

Kid snaps his jaws at me as Killer holds him back with a hand on his chest. “Detective of the Damned,” Killer says calmly. “Thank you for the invitation. You said there’d be food?”

I nod with a pleasant smile. “Right that way, Hachi is the best takoyaki chef this side of the Red Line.”

“Calling him Hachi now, are we?” Nami mutters under her breath.

“I roped him into feeding a small army of ne'er do wells and rapscallions, I figure a nickname is the least I can do,” I mutter back.

Killer basically manhandles Kid in the direction I indicated, standing in between us as they pass and Kid gives me a nasty glare. I stick my tongue out at him and he nearly lunges again. The rest of the Kid pirates stay aboard their ship, though I see two people I recognize as Heat and Wire giving me narrow-eyed looks from above.

“I told you not to insult them in the first sentence,” I hear Killer admonish quietly as they leave.

“I didn’t,” Kid responds petulantly. “It was the *second* sentence.”

“That was certainly a display,” Matthew Mercer’s voice calls from the other direction. I jump and spin around.

“Oh yeah, this guy is here now,” Zoro pipes up, entirely unhelpful.

I try to think of a witty one-liner. “You have a labret piercing,” I say, stupidly, instead of anything even remotely more appropriate.

Trafalgar Law raises a single eyebrow as he slides down the ladder nailed to the side of the Polar Tang, which I guess pulled up while I wasn’t paying attention. “Yes. Very observant of you,” he says flatly, catching his nodachi as it’s tossed down to him by Bepo.

The polar bear mink blinks wide eyes down at us and waves with one big furry paw before bowing. “Hi. Sorry. Hi.”

“Hi,” we all chorus back automatically. Then Nami and Usopp do doubletakes.

“Wait, is that a polar bear?” Nami asks.

“Wait, did that bear just *talk?”* Usopp gawks.

So yeah Law has a labret piercing sitting just above his goatee, which is for some reason really throwing me off. He’s also got that fuzzy white hat with the spots, rim spanning the whole thing instead of the bill it has post-timeskip. He’s in that yellow sweater that makes him look low-key like he listens to Radiohead because they understand him on a soul deep level. The man’s got legs for days, fucking *tall people,* and has them shoved in a pair of spot-covered skinny jeans.

Back up on his bright yellow sub I can see two heads poking over the rails beside Bepo, wearing hats I recognize as belonging to Shachi and Penguin.

“That was hot!” Shachi calls over with a thumbs up.

“Your insult game goes hard!” Penguin adds.

“Thanks, I appreciate you!” I holler back.

“Go back inside, what the hell are you doing,” Law deadpans, staring at them over his shoulder with a look that is both disparaging and flat.

They both snicker and go clamouring back into the belly of the ship.

Law turns back to the lot of us with a mildly creepy smile that I think is supposed to look relaxed. “So Pirate Hunter Roronoa Zoro-ya and the Detective of the Damned, E. D. Domino-ya. How many people have you two killed, I wonder?” he muses.

Me and Zoro side eye each other.

“Is that your icebreaker question? I’ll be super honest it’s probably a lot, but I only really remember like, three,” I offer. “Wait, does it count if the guy was already dead? I don’t know if adding zombies to your kill count is allowed.”

“Fucktons,” Zoro says simply.

“You two are the worst,” Nami whimpers into her hands. Usopp just lets out a broken sob.

“Food was this way?” Law prompts, pointing a tattooed finger past us.

I nod my head and he starts moving, staring down at me with something glinting in his golden eyes. Then he’s past and gone, headed for Hachi’s takoyaki setup where there’s faint sounds of yelling already.

We all stare after him for a long moment.

“The things I want that man to do to me would get us arrested in over 80 kingdoms. But he's like 7 years older than me and by the look of him too traumatized to not have issues with intimacy in some kinda way,” I say with a sigh.

“Ed,” Usopp says admonishingly.

“No, they have a point,” Nami muses. “‘How many people have you killed?’ That’s a man with *problems.”*

“I mean, did you see the ass on him? His legs went on for fucking miles,” I add, trying very hard to keep a visual on said ass as he gets further and further away.

Zoro inclines his head. “He did have pretty nice legs,” he agrees.

Of course Zoro would be a legs guy.

“Oh, and he’s the reason you owe me 12,000 berri. Eyebags like fucking *trenches* on that motherfucker. I don’t think he sleeps,” I say sagely.

“When did I agree to that?” Zoro asks with a frown.

“You were unconscious. These guys agreed for you, and if you refuse they’re under obligation to pay it in full — how they divide the cost doesn’t matter to me,” I saw breezily, indicating Nami and Usopp.

“What?! You can’t just do that!” Usopp yelps.

“I didn’t consent to this!” Nami shrieks.

“I didn’t agree to shit!” Zoro squawks.

“What a bunch of sore losers,” a new voice says, somewhere between a scoff and a laugh.

“I don’t foresee financial prosperity in the green one’s future,” another voice drones. Taliesin Jaffe?

We all turn around and I blink at the two new ships in our makeshift harbour. The pizza themed Jewelry Margherita and the Grudge Dolph with its giant straw doll figurehead have just kinda… appeared while we weren’t looking.

Both ship’s Captain’s have already made landfall — they’re both standing where Law had been a moment ago, near each other but not close enough to give them the impression they arrived together.

“I’m here for the food!” Jewelry Bonney herself proclaims, one hand holding up a peace sign and the other planted on her hip. She’s got rad stockings that reach her mid thigh tucked into a pair of black boots, and striped shorts that attach to suspenders going over her white crop top and under the brown fur jacket she’s sporting. Her pink hair is spilling out from under her green hat and when she grins it makes her anti-eyebrow piercing shift up with her cheek.

“My cards have already shown me which way to go,” Basil Hawkins claims, already walking toward his destination while his white flowy cape thingy swishes around him all mysterious-like. His long blond hair trails down his exposed chest and his tattooed cross patée is stark against the pale column of his throat. The weird tattooed stripe/triangle things that go up his forehead make his very off putting demeanor that much more off putting. Yeah, him having Taliesin Jaffe's voice tracks.

“He’s lying. We heard you tell the other guy,” Bonney says as she trots after Hawkins, snickering and quirking half painted lips at us.

Hawkins barely misses a step, be he does. “The cards said it first,” he says snootily, walking faster while Bonney starts laughing louder.

“I get the weirdest feeling you and that guy are gonna get along,” Nami mutters as we watch their backs.

“Really? I feel the exact opposite,” Zoro muses. “I think their bullshit will cancel each other out and they’ll just hate each other.”

“Er — hello?” a new voice pipes up.

“Ok someone’s gotta keep their eye on the harbour this is getting ridiculous,” I mutter as we spin around yet again. “Oh, this guy.”

‘This guy’ is X Drake. He’s just stepping off his ship, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword and axe and the other adjusting his domino mask. Dear lord… who dressed this man. The giant X on his chest is… so very visible and his hat is… so very pointy.

“What an… interesting… outfit…” Nami says under her breath, raking her eyes up and down this poor son of a bitch with a crippling amount of judgment.

Drake shifts his weight from one foot to the other, clearing uncomfortable with her gaze. Zoro snorts into his hand. I just… stare at him. He looks like a *bug.* He looks like one of Luffy’s *beetles.* I know he’s supposed to look like a pterodactyl but, *god.*

“Dude,” I say disparagingly, “you’re wearing all leather. And a *cape.* It’s like… summer. It’s high 30°s out here.”

Drake’s mouth twists up in a frown that makes his X marked chin dimple. “...Ok,” he says slowly, awkwardly and just a little hurt. “Nice to meet you, too.”

I shake my head. “Dear lord. Yeah, uh, welcome. Food’s that way,” I say, jerking my thumb as there’s a loud shout from that way. We all turn to look. “You guys think Robin has Luffy under control in any capacity?”

“Absolutely not,” Zoro respondes without pause.

“Usopp, go make sure no one is dead or dying,” Nami orders, smacking him on the back so hard he jolts forwards and almost falls. “You can escort our guest over!”

Usopp whimpers and starts toward the takoyaki stand in stiff jerky movements. Drake slowly begins walking after him, giving the remaining three of us a look I can only describe as ‘pathetic cat,’ or like the fear you can only sense in the side-eye you get from a dog.

There’s a loud clamour from the harbour, music blasting out of the giant horn figurehead no doubt belonging to the On Air Pirates. I clap along to the beat as it pulls in and parks besides the numerous boats already here.

Their beat crescendos as the man, the myth, the legend himself — Scratchmen Apoo, that is — comes dancing down their ramp playing an absolutely banger sax riff with his arm, which is the saxophone. I burst into applause as he comes to a neat and dramatic end with a fancy pose.

"Thank you, thank you, I'll be here for… I don't know, I haven't decided yet!" he announces, sweeping into a wide bow with his double jointed arms. When he straightens up he gasps. "My, two Supernovas already? And a lovely lady! Would you mind?" he asks, not waiting for an answer before pulling out one of them picture Transponders.

I immediately grab Zoro around the shoulders before he can run, throwing up a peace sign with a wide smile and kicking Nami in the shin so she'll smile too. It's more of a grimace to be honest, but at least she has a peace sign too.

"This doesn't count as my picture since your Captain isn't in it!" Apoo declares. "Food's this way, right? Thanks again!"

"Wha — alright, there he goes," I mumble as he just kinda struts past us.

"Who are we missing now?" Nami questions, shooting Apoo's back a nasty look.

"Uhhhhhh… just Urouge and Bege," I answer, turning back to the harbour and jumping a foot in the air. "Jesus fucking Christ!" I shout, pressing a hand to my racing heart. "Where the fuck did you come from?!"

"My ship," Urouge answers easily, thumb indicating said ship like it's totally normal he just snuck the fuck up on us. He's a massive guy, thick arms tattooed in a fire motif in a priest-esque outfit with a pair of big white wings on his back. He's walking like he just came from the aforementioned ship and doesn't pause as he makes his way toward, then past us. "I believe you said takoyaki was available, I presume it's there."

"What is it with these people?" Zoro mutters under his breath. "Like *mice.* Quiet and here for your damn food."

“Last ship, incoming,” Nami announces, pointing at the Nostra Castello as it pulls in.

I gently (kind of, as gentle as I’m willing to be with his ass) kick Zoro’s shin. “Be polite, please, I want a handshake out of this motherfucker before we start acting like lunatics,” I plead.

“Why?” Zoro asks, not-so-subtly shifting his weight to his other foot.

“I dunno, just seems like the kind of guy you want to like you,” I say, averting my eyes. It would be baller to have a cordial relationship with this motherfucker just in case I don’t manage to head off Wholecake or any other kind of mess with Big Mom in the future. Catch my ass in the corner thinking ahead for once.

Nami and Zoro do that thing they’ve been doing and exchange a charged look over my head. I shoot both of them narrowed-sideyes, then refocus my gaze on our final guest as he descends to the base.

Capone Bege is, and I say this in the nicest way possible, serving absolute Beetlejuice cunt. He’s got the pinstripe suit and green accents and everything. The hat and cigar are pulling together the whole mob boss thing, but I’ll be so for real; I’m not gonna be able to stop imagining him with bright green hair.

“You’se the schmooks running this joint?” he asks, New York Italian accent thick as he puffs a ring.

“Yes, sir. Detective E. D. Domino, pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I say pleasantly, holding my hand out.

Bege reaches back and we share a firm shake. “I’m to understand you’se the one giving out invitations?” he asks.

I nod my head. “That’s correct. Now about our… tentative deal,” I prompt.

Bege inclines his head with a bit of an eye roll. “Mhm, the wine. Three bottles of your finest, nothing more nothing less, and my hands are stayed — as per the terms of our agreement,” he agrees.

“Wine?” Nami mutters behind me before making a muffled sound of pain as Zoro subtly stomps on her foot. “I mean yes. The wine,” she repeats, slightly louder and like she suddenly remembered.

Bege’s eyes flicker to them. “Interesting subordinates you’se got here.”

“Aren’t they darling,” I say, turning a sharp edged smile at them as they straighten up. “The festivities are right this way. You’re the last to arrive, we’ll escort you over,” I offer.

He inclines his head again, and we set off toward the sounds of yelling and smells of fried octopus.

Chapter End Notes

WHY IS EUSTASS KID 6'9". WHO SAID THAT WAS OK. I AM NOT ALRIGHT WITH THAT. AND YOU'RE TELLING ME X DRAKE IS *TALLER THAN THAT???* Also because I mentioned the Polar Tang I am legally obligated to bring up the Titan submersible again and the inexplicable but looming sense of doom it brings.

Oh course, because I am who I am, there's art of Ed for this arc.

This can only go well, right?

...right?

Chapter 100: Chapter One Hundred: For We May Or May Never All Meet Here Again

Chapter Summary

Here's a Health to the Company - The Longest Johns

"He's talking mad shit!" Luffy shouts, pointing an accusing finger at Kid, who's sitting across from him with Killer at his side.

Chapter Notes

Holy fucking cow we made it to 100 chapters. What the fuck. Holy shit. Uh. Congrats to us, Jesus Christ. Also we're over 400k now. What the fuck is wrong with me.

This chapter is so fucking chaotic and all over the place and I love it. You'll have no idea what's happening 80% of the time and you'll laugh your ass off. That's a threat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When we reach the takoyaki stand, Luffy is already trying to fight Kid and I cannot blame him in the least.

"Luffy, darling, I'm sure you're in the right but what are you doing?" I call as we approach, an eyebrow arched but a smile still tugging at the corner of my lips.

Franky and the Rosy Life Riders had done a great job clearing out rubble and making the area presentable, a plethora of tables made of scrap surround the takoyaki stand itself in addition to a makeshift bar, with a large table already populated by many of the Strawhats situated closest to it. Kid and Killer are both sat at the long table, but the rest of the party seems spread between the others.

"He's talking mad shit!" Luffy shouts, pointing an accusing finger at Kid, who's sitting across from him with Killer at his side.

“Stop talking mad shit,” I demand, taking a seat beside my Captain and fighting down a groan as my poor legs finally get a break. Then I lean over the front of the bar and swipe one of the bottles of wine with a wink at Camie before passing it to Bege.

“Wait, why does this guy get alcohol?” Apoo asks from the table he’s sitting at with Hawkins, who’s ignoring everyone and reading his tarot cards.

“Predetermined deal,” Bege says gruffly, reading over the label and whistling appreciatively as he makes for one of the unoccupied tables.

“Is that my good wine..?” I hear Sanji say faintly before making a pained sound as someone stomps on his foot. We really do only have one way of dealing with each other, don’t we?

Luffy hops up from his seat beside me to trot across the way to where Hachi is serving up takoyaki with Pappag, taking the dish he’s handing and just standing with it still held out and a blank smile until he starts piling more on.

“We don’t actually have our liquor licence, but we do have other alcohol besides the wine available,” Camie says nervously from where she’s holding a bottle of what I think is rum.

We all pause to stare at her. “Camie, baby, we’re pirates,” I say slowly. “We don’t give a rat’s ass if you don’t have your liquor licence.”

She blinks twice. “Oh. Oh, right!” she laughs, pouring the rum (yeah, it’s rum) into cups.

The small amount of tension that was blanketing the group disappears as alcohol is brought out. Who could have guessed that one? I snag a bottle of my own schnapps, also stashed behind the bar, and raise it up. “I propose a toast,” I proclaim.

There’s a couple raised eyebrows. “The fuck are you toasting to, shortstack?” Kid snarks.

“Shut it, bitchtits,” I shoot back back without hesitation and without moving my expression an inch. Heedless of his squawks of outrage, I continue. “We are at the forefront of this coming era. We lead the charge into the New World, and I expect great things from all of you. Whether it’s an Emperor, one of their subordinates, Warlord, or King of the Pirates,” I spare a moment to wink at my Captain as he laughs, “you are each a light that represents change in this world. Cheers!”

Half of our gathered peers whoop, the rest just raise a glass and throw their drink back.

“Ed, why the hell was that a better toast than the one you gave at your own wedding?” Nami asks exasperatedly, leaning past me with her already empty tankard for Camie to refill.

“You’re *married?”* Kid asks, voice warped by disbelief and revulsion.

Me and Nami both pause to turn and stare at him. “Yes,” I say slowly. “Sorry, did I just crush a fantasy of yours?”

Kid snaps his teeths at me before Killer lays a hand on his shoulder. “He means congratulations,” he cuts in.

“Who would marry *your* arse?” Kid spits, face still stuck in a grimace. Killer gives him a disappointed look that he entirely ignores.

I jerk my thumb back at Luffy as he shoves the entire tray of takoyaki Hachi had been piling up in his mouth. When he notices I’m pointing to him he waves and his face splits into a wide grin, making half-chewed takoyaki spill out of his face.

I fondly shake my head and turn back to the conversation. Kid’s grimace has transformed into a look of unadulterated disgust, eyes going back and forth between Luffy and I. I wiggle my ring finger at him in emphasis.

“Ew,” Kid says simply.

Killer lifts his hand from Kid’s shoulder then claps it back down. “Match made in heaven, I’m sure.”

I snort. “Yeah, something like that.”

“But like… really? *Him?”* Kid reiterates, a thick finger swiveling between me and my Captain.

I arch my eyebrow at him. “You seem reeeeal fixated on this, doll.” I give him a slow up and down, mouth curling into a smirk. “What is it, c’mon, you can tell me.”

Nami snorts into her cup as Camie hands it back to her, topped up.

Kid scowls at me. “Alright you shitegoblin, I don’t know what you’re insinuating but if you value your legs you’ll shut yer gab right now,” he borderline growls.

I probably shouldn’t piss this guy off.

“You wanna fuck me so bad it makes you look stupid,” I drawl, giving him a salacious grin as I lean back against Nami and tilt my head.

Yeah when have I ever actually given a shit about consequences.

Nami chokes on her drink as she bursts into wheezes, drawing a lot more attention to my… let’s call it a *poor choice,* than is strictly necessary.

Kid, of course, explodes. Smoke billows out of his nose and ears as he leaps out of his chair and half lunges across the table, Killer grabbing him by the back of the jacket before he can actually throttle my ass. “WHAT DID YOU SAY?!” he howls, reaching as far as he can and grabbing me by the collar, shaking me back and forth.

“I’M SORRY I WAS JOKING I’M SORRY—” I crow, trying desperately to make my cackles sound apologetic.

Luffy trots back to the table with another plate of takoyaki piled sky high. He frowns and smacks Kid’s hands where he’s grappling me. “Hey. No. No touching my First Mate,” he says, sounding more like he’s berating a dog than telling off a pirate with a bounty over 300k berri.

“Yeah, what he said, turd burglar. Hands off the merchandise,” I choke out, wiggling out of his hold and swallowing down my snickers.

“You have such a way with words Detective-ya,” Law drones, appearing behind me with a cup in hand.

I jump with a shriek, the giggles scared right outta me. “Christ,” I swear, hand on my chest. Then I point at him with an imperious glare. “I’m not taking this from a guy who *literally* wears his heart on his sleeve.”

He squints at me in confusion, slowly lowering himself into a free seat at our table and propping his impractical ass sword beside him.

“Can I have some of that?” I ask Luffy, pointing at his plate. He scrutinizes the takoyaki for a second, eyes darting to each individual piece, before shrugging and reaching out to try and pluck a specific one out. “You know what I’d kill for right now? Smoked fish,” I mumble, staring into the middle distance. “I’d demolish the *shit* out of some smoked fish.”

“Wait, are you allowed to have sex with other people?” Nami interrupts, finally calm and with her brow furrowed.

I pause to turn to her. “What a random thing to ask. I mean, I’m assuming there’ll never be banging with this one,” I jerk my thumb as Luffy as he passes me a piece of takoyaki I immediately stick in my mouth, “but it’s kinda up to him how exclusive I am.”

“Yeah, no sex for me,” Luffy confirms, inhaling half of his plate at once. “Kissing is where I draw the line.”

Nami does a double take. “Wait, I thought you didn’t know what that was?” she asks incredulously.

We both stare at her for a long moment. “Nami, I grew up in a bar surrounded by pirates and then with bandits. Of course I know what sex is,” Luffy says, looking confused by her confusion.

“But — back on the Baratie when we all thought you were propositioning Ed you sounded like you had no idea what it was!” she defends.

“Nams, doll, darling, he was confused as to why you thought that was what he was asking,” I explain with exaggeratedly slow words. Luffy nods along and passes me another piece of takoyaki.

Nami throws her hands up before smearing them down her face. “How was I supposed to know that! I’m not telepathically connected like you bozos!”

I roll my eyes. “Anyway, from a legal standpoint it doesn’t matter if I get around because fuck the law — not you,” I say aside to Law, who raises his cup while looking tired of us already, “but I *did* send marriage papers off to get legally recognized because I thought it would be funny. If we’re feeling frisky we can go up to Marie Jois and check with them to make sure it’s ok,” I say cheekily.

“That’s a horrible idea and you’re an idiot,” Nami says into her hands.

“Like I said though, it’s really up to Luffy if I can sleep around. We haven’t stopped anywhere but Thriller Bark since we got hitched so there really hasn’t been reason to ask,” I lean back and tilt my head onto Luffy’s shoulder. “So? What’s your verdict, Cap?”

Luffy shrugs. “I don’t wanna do that, but you like to do that, so I guess it’s ok if you do it with other people. But not that guy,” he says, pointing at Kid, who looks so severely bewildered by this conversation I think his brain might have stalled.

That knocks him out of it though, and right back to squawking. “I don’t wanna shag this imbecile!” he shouts.

“Shag? Like the spy?” Usopp asks, sliding down to our side of the table from where the rest of the Strawhats are avoiding the Supernovas like the plague and have been largely ignoring our spectacle.

“Aw, you remembered from Rainbase,” I coo. “Yeah we’re talking about my god-given right to fuck.”

Usopp gives me an incredulous look, then turns to Nami. She heaves a sigh. “Luffy said Ed can have sex with other people even though they’re married,” she translates exasperatedly.

He blinks twice, slowly. “Fun? Now you just have to get some game, actually seduce someone,” he jeers, reaching around Luffy to elbow me.

I scoff. “Excuse you? I *have* game. I have *been* seducing people. What the hell do you think I do on the islands we restock at?” Both Nami and Usopp turn to me blankly. I double take. “Wait did you guys not know that?”

“Exactly how many people have you been banging?!” they both squawks, eyes bugging out.

“Uh — it’s rude to ask a not-lady their body count—” I flounder, face going hot.

“This is the most bizarre conversation I think I’ve ever witnessed, and that’s saying something,” Law muses, idly taking a sip of his drink.

I spin back to him. “I’m not taking this from a guy who in another life would have raccoon stripe dyed hair and wear checkered belts.”

Law looks both confused and exhausted, which is pretty much what I expected.

“This got so off track so fast,” Killer mutters, sticking a straw through one of his mask’s face holes so he can sip his drink.

I snap. “Right. You don’t want to have sex. Like ever?” I ask, pointing at Luffy.

He makes a considering face before soundly shaking his head. “Nah. Sounds kinda icky if you ask me, but you can do what you want.”

I nod. “Cool. You’re probably ace then.”

Luffy furrows his brow at me. “What? No, I’m *Luffy.* You’ve known me waaaay longer than Ace, how are you messing our names up now?”

I roll my eyes. “No, baby, *asexual,* not your bitchass brother. It means you feel no sexual attraction.” I snap again. “Oh but that does remind me. Law you’re invited to the smoke sesh we’re planning with Ace and Sabo.”

Law looks heavenward and I see his dark circles grow three shades darker. “If your ass means Fire Fist Ace, I’m lunging at you like Eustass-ya,” he promises.

“Ok, we’ll circle back to that one,” I say diplomatically.

“How did it get even *more* off track?” Killer says faintly.

“Where were we?” I mumble, brow furrowing before I snap again. “Right! Kid you son of a motherless goat, where do you get off manhandling an injured person?”

“Do you guys have juice?” Bonney asks behind us, holding the cup of rum Camie gave her in one hand and a huge plate of takoyaki in the other.

“Oh! Sure, we have orange or apple,” Camie offers.

“I’ll take that,” Zoro says, taking Bonney’s rum as he walks past and drops into the seat beside Nami.

“Apple juice sounds good,” Bonney says, not looking put out by Zoro’s theft in the least.

“Can I have an apple juice too?” I call. “I think it’s better for everyone involved if I don’t get white girl shwasted during this. Zoro, babysit my schnapps,” I order, passing him my bottle. Zoro rolls his eyes but tucks it into his haramaki.

“Not a rum drinker?” Law inquires, taking a sip of his own.

“Alcohol is gross. That schnapps is unironically the only shit it’ll stomach,” I deadpan.

“Word up,” Bonney agrees, passing me one of the apple juices Camie pours and taking the other for herself before sitting at our table. “It all tastes like angry sewage.”

I gesture to her with a triumphant look shot at Zoro, who rolls his eyes and throws his rum back. “See? She gets it!”

“Backtracking; why exactly are you injured?” Law asks, eyes narrowing at my bandaged arms. “That have anything to do with this ‘Thriller Bark’ you mentioned?”

I stare at him for a moment. “Gosh you’re pretty, but you look like you lack the emotional intelligence the good lord gave a seahorse.”

His curious expression goes flat. “Everything you say makes me hate you.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, sure it does. Anyway this,” I vaguely raise my arms while taking a drink of my juice, “fuckin’ *Warlords.* There’s coming out the damn *walls* around here.”

The four Supernovas at our table perk up. “You were involved in that whole mess with Crocodile on Alabasta, were you not?” Law asks.

“Ok questions guy, let someone else do the interview, why don’t you,” I snark. Law’s face twists up. “But yeah. Fuck that guy. I have *opinions* about Warlords, let me tell you.”

Kid groans and his eyes roll back into his head. “Well you clearly have the floor, go ahead,” he sneers sarcastically.

“Thank you,” I say with faux brightness, holding up a finger. “First, Crocodile; beat that motherfucker up. He wouldn’t join my GSA. Moria; just beat him up. Was a bitch and a weirdo with a cracked up laugh. Kuma; beat *us* up and did this,” I gesture to my everything, “but we had a drink so we’re cool,” I list off, ticking up a finger for each.

“You’ve met Kuma? Kuma beat you up? You *drank* with Kuma?” Bonney rapidly fires off, eyes blinking wide as she leans forward.

I give her a smile. “Yeah. Chill guy, all things considered. Still not telling you what I did,” I sing when I feel Luffy’s puppy dog eyes burrowing into the side of my head.

“Boooooo,” he heckles. Zoro snorts into his second cup, which I guess he got at some point.

“I’m not done. Mihawk; I accidentally called him a gothic vampire bird the first time we met and LIVED, so fair to say I love that guy. Still not convinced he doesn’t paint his sword, though. Jimbei; love him. Haven’t met him yet, but I love him on principle. Motherfucker is a *whale shark* fishman, are you kidding? Boa Hancock; scares me. Frightening lady with a rampant case of misandry and I just *know* she will not like me and dread meeting her. Doflamingo; rancid vibes. Absolutely foul. I ever see him, I’m running the opposite direction. He has the demeanor of a child predator,” I finish.

Law chokes on his drink. Kid bursts out laughing and Killer poorly muffles snickers under his mask. Bonney is still directing that wide-eyed stare at me, but her mouth stretches up into a smile. Nami and Usopp both bury their faces in their hands and groan.

“When the hell did you call Mihawk *that?* And what do you mean ‘paint his sword?’” Zoro asks incredulously.

“You were kinda bleeding out and half drowning at the time, he was quizzing me and Luffy about our goals and using his freaky stare to unnerve my ass,” I reply with a hand wave. “The sword paint thing is just a joke. Like, his sword isn’t black because it’s infused with Haki, he just paints it black so it looks like that.”

“I can’t believe he didn't turn you into sashimi like he did me,” Zoro grumbles. “This is blatant favouritism.”

“My charming personality and dazzling smile works wonders,” I drawl, flashing that smile like a weapon.

“Is that how you’re seducing your apparently *plentiful* suitors?” Usopp mutters under his breath. I reach over and smack him without moving my expression an inch.

“I have a question for you, Detective-ya,” Law pipes up.

“You can call me Ed,” I offer, taking the piece of takoyaki Luffy offers me.

Law stares for a second. “...Detective-ya,” he repeats. Can’t win ‘em all I guess. “What was the reason you saw fit to gather us all here?”

I shrug. “Honestly? I just wanted to meet you guys. I don’t expect Sabaody itself to be anything short of a living hell, so this seemed like a better alternative if I actually wanted to get some socializing in before everything went to shit.”

Everyone at the table raises an eyebrow. Or equivalent, I guess, for Kid. And Killer has his face covered but he somehow gives the impression he’s doing the same and that’s pretty impressive in and of itself.

“You planning to do something stupid when you get there?” Bonney asks, suspicion in her eyes.

I scoff. “As if. Only thing I plan on doing is giving an old man a shakedown and avoiding the island’s primary industry. Fate has it fucking out for us though, so one way or another we’re gonna get cracked on the head.”

“That’s awfully pessimistic,” Law drones.

“Yeah, you’d think,” I grumble.

“So you just wanted to meet us all,” Law reiterates. I nod. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the coin I bequeathed him, weaving it through his tattooed knuckles. “And what was the meaning of this then, hm?” he inquires, head tilted back with narrowed eyes and a raised brow.

“It was given to me by the mayor of Water 7, it's this year's Aqua Laguna commemorative coin,” I explain. “I was putting whatever I thought was gonna get you fuckers here in my letters — and if I'm being perfectly honest, you look like you haven't received a gift in years so I figured it had a 50/50 shot of working.”

Law’s eyebrow raises further. “And you banked my participation on my… gift deprivation? Which you only *guessed* existed?”

I mean I *actually* banked on his interest in the Will of D and the *fact* I know he has a coin collection, but. “Yeah I totally did that,” I say flippantly. “It worked, as all things I try do, so it’s an all around win for me.”

“‘As all things you try do?’ Ed I know you were unconscious for five days, but you do remember *why,* right?” Nami asks incredulously.

“Yup. And despite the collateral, everything worked out. We’re not dead, right?” I say cheerfully. Nami slams her head into the table.

“From what I’ve seen, that seems like a miracle,” Law murmurs into his cup.

“I’m not taking this from a guy who would be sorry for party rocking,” I immediately retort.

“What the fuck does that even mean?” he mutters, sinking his face deeper into his cup.

“Being around you makes me nauseous,” Kid announces. We all stop and turn to him. “Where’s your cyborg?”

I sigh. “Franky!” I holler to the other side of the table. The man in question peeks his head above where he has been very poorly trying to teach Robin and Chopper how his chain arm

thing actually works to blink at me. I point at Kid. “I found you a weirdo, talk to him about robotics so he’ll leave me alone!”

Franky flashes a big grin and gives me a thumbs up, except he uses his hand attached to the chain which Chopper had been holding, which only succeeds in smacking Chopper in the face with his thumb and the chain suddenly retracting with enough force to hit *Franky* in the face.

“Right, none of you are interesting in the slightest compared to that,” Kid states, getting to his feet and immediately speed walking to that side of the table, Killer following diligently.

“You're just letting him walk away?” Nami asks dryly. “He called you uninteresting.”

“Well being a raging bitch isn't a crime, so he's free to go,” I say mildly.

Bonney starts cackling. I like her already. “You guys seem like you stir the pot, which I don’t like,” she says, but she’s still grinning. “But you’re also fun, and I like how you had food on hand, so you get a pass from me.”

I place a hand over my heart. “Jewelry Bonney, you just made my day,” I proclaim. “And it’s really less ‘stirring the pot’ and more ‘getting tossed head first into the soup.’”

“Do you think I could swim in soup?” Luffy asks, brow furrowed in thought.

“I think you could drink the soup faster than it could drown you,” I offer.

“Remember when you called the ocean the great pirate soup?” Zoro remenices.

“I hope, dearly and truly, that someone tries to drown you in soup one day,” Law snarks. He raises a hand and points a menacing finger at me as I open my mouth. “Don’t you dare. Whatever you were going to say, *shut it.”*

I politely close my mouth. Then I think *fuck it* and open that sucker back up. “I’m not taking this from a guy with enough older emo cousin burnout gifted kid energy to choke a room.”

Law slams his head into the table and my crew bursts out laughing.

“I need more takoyaki,” Bonney announces, getting to her feet with her empty plate — I didn’t even see her inhale the thing — and meandering back to the takoyaki stand while Hachi eyes her in fear.

“I need smoked fish,” I moan. I acknowledged the craving and now I’m gonna be thinking about it for the rest of this meeting.

“I need to be put out of my misery,” Law mumbles into the table.

I reach over and pat his hat, feeling quite bad for the Law two years from now who will have to deal with us for much longer than an evening.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 100! Luffy is asexual, Ed is apparently a whore, Bonney is a gift to the universe, Law is a victim of bullying, and Kid is a motherfucker. Next up; Hawkins is a cryptic little asshole, Urouge is basically a ninja, Drake is just as bullyable as Law, and the world is a musical if you're not a coward.

Also the mental illness hit and I redrew good ol' Original Flavour Ed, which I'll also link in chapter 10 where the original art is, and in the first chapter because maybe having a visual of the beloved idiot right off the bat would be good for you. Just... damn y'all. I've been at this fanfic shit a while. I'm really proud of how far my writing has come, even prouder of my art progress even if I'm not exactly where I'd like my skill yet, but much more than that I'm proud of you. Thanks for sticking around for 100 chapters, and here's to 100 more.

SEE I DIDN'T GET AS SAPPY THIS TIME WOOOOOOOO—

Chapter 101: Chapter One Hundred and One: Man, What Are You Doing Here?

Chapter Summary

Piano Man - Billy Joel

“It’s like a vibe check,” I say sagely. “If they can’t fuck with my offputting demeanor and bedazzling sense of humor we know they needn’t be bothered with.”

Chapter Notes

A couple of people expressed confusion about something last chapter so I wanted to take a second to clarify — Ed is aromantic bisexual, which means they're *physically* attracted to both genders, but *romantically* attracted to no one. I did notice a few people confusing them for being asexual just generally over the course of the fic so I figure it's worthwhile to say it. Luffy on the other hand is my aro/ace king and feels no attraction of any kind. Aromanticism and asexuality are like wine and bread, they pair very well but don't necessarily have to be taken together — if you have any confusion about it I suggest reading up on their differences online. BOOM obligatory gay ass PSA for pride month over back to our regularly scheduled program.

Preemptive apology to everyone who was praying for an end to the Bully X Drake Agenda, I just had too much fun with it lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ok, who do we annoy until they love or hate us next,” I ask, scanning around the party for the next victim.

“What kind of strategy is that?” Zoro asks incredulously.

“It’s like a vibe check,” I say sagely. “If they can’t fuck with my offputting demeanor and bedazzling sense of humor we know they needn’t be bothered with.”

“Has anyone ever managed to pass that?” Nami asks dubiously, gesturing to where Law still has his head buried in the table.

“Oh yeah, he passed with flying colours,” I confirm.

Law lifts his head at that, an incredulous and slightly alarmed look on his face. “Excuse me?”

I laugh at his expression. “Your reactions are *hilarious,* first of all. That’s the vibe check, doll. I like the cut of your jib, so you pass.”

“Don’t call me doll,” he immediately refutes.

“Sure, princess,” I agree easily.

“That’s worse!” he squawks.

“Fine,” I groan. “Inamorato, is that better?”

Law gets up and leaves. He just fucking walks away. We all stare at him as he drops into a chair at Drake’s table, glowering. Drake opens his mouth to say something and Law just holds a hand up and drains his drink, then slams his head back on the table.

Drake turns to stare at us with concern and bewilderment. We wave.

“I think he likes us,” I say proudly.

“Sweet mercy,” Nami mutters, smearing a hand down her face. She chugs her drink, which was still half full, and slams the empty cup on Camie’s bar. “I need to be away from you,” she announces, getting to her feet and leaving, dragging Usopp with her. He does not protest.

“I think he wanted you dead,” Zoro says mildly, swirling his cup around. “Camie, can I get another?”

“Coming right up!” she calls, half lunging across the counter to snag his cup from his outstretched hand.

“God, Zoro, at least use your feet and make it easy for the poor girl,” I admonish.

“Not very cordial at all, swordsman,” Robin drawls, dropping into Nami’s vacated seat. “I hope you don’t mind me joining you, the redhead was not very pleasant to be around.”

I place a solemn hand on her shoulder. “I would never judge you for trying to get away from that box of dildos.”

Drake chokes as he sits down. “Excuse me, what?” he coughs, wacking his hand into his chest.

“Have you had the displeasure of meeting Eustass Kid yet?” I ask instead of trying to explain that one.

Drake makes a face. “He walked up to me, told me my hat looked stupid, then walked away,” he mutters.

“It is a stupid hat,” I agree, mouth twisting down. Man, I *hate* agreeing with that guy.

“You look like a Hercules,” Luffy pipes up.

Drake somehow gets more confused. “A what?”

“Beetle,” I translate. Zoro bursts out laughing and Robin starts snickering behind her hand. Drake somehow gets more dismayed. I stroke my chin in false thought, a sly smirk sliding onto my face. “I sword of understand what he means,” I say, smooth in my use of the word to the point I can see him blinking slowly, trying to convince himself whether it even happened or not.

Hah. Loser. I’m gonna see how many Sword references I can make until this fucker breaks.

“I foresee an identity crisis in your future,” Hawkins suddenly says, scaring half of us to death as he slides into a chair and places a single card on the table, face down.

“Sweet mercy, I think I need my ears checked,” I mutter.

“I— wha — me?” Drake questions, blinking owlishly.

Hawkins gives him a loooong blank stare until he starts shifting uncomfortably. “Yes,” he says eventually. Then he turns back to me with a singular intensity. “Would you like a reading?”

I watch the way he shuffles his deck of cards between his hands. “Sure, why not.”

He hums and starts shuffling faster, cards twirling and rolling across his hands like a circus performer. “Do you know much about tarot?” he asks, still staring.

“A bit,” I admit. “It’s been a while, but I remember some of the basics.”

Hawkins’ shuffling stops in a flourish, and he holds the deck out for me. “Knock,” he instructs.

I reach out and knock thrice. He smiles faintly, fanning the deck open and dropping the first card on the table. “The World, reversed,” he announces. I frown. I was always shit with the reverse meanings. “Hm,” he hums, “interesting.”

“What does that mean?” Drake is the one that asks.

“Please save your questions for the end,” Hawkins says imperiously, laying down the second card. “Death.”

“Is Ed gonna die?!” Luffy shrieks, eyes bugging out at the skeleton astride a white horse.

“NO,” I cut in with a laugh. “It means like, rebirth and stuff. Change, or something.”

Hawkins lays down another card. “The Emperor,” he mutters.

“If that card means we’re fighting an Emperor, I’m gonna ask that you put the damn thing back in the deck,” Zoro deadpans.

“It’s more likely to mean an authority figure, not an actual Emperor,” I murmur, brow furrowing as I track across the cards.

Hawkins places one more card, then puts his deck on the table. “Wheel of Fortune,” he states.

“Planning on doing any gambling, Detective?” Robin asks. “If nothing else, I remember you being quite adept.”

I shake my head and stare at the card Hawkins originally placed. It’s perfectly in line with the rest of the spread. I look to Hawkins and incline my head at it.

He tilts his own head, then moves his eyes to the start of the lineup. He taps the World card. “You have a big goal you’d like to accomplish,” he says. “But the road to completing this goal…” his voice trails off and his finger drifts to the second card. “Something is ending, and a change is imminent. Things will be different, and fighting it could be… bad for your health.” I frown at the first two cards. Hawkins runs his finger along the Emperor card. “This could be you, or it could not,” he says lightly.

I tilt my head. “Meaning?”

“Well, there could be a new authority or father-like figure entering your life,” he says with a hand wave. “Or it could be representative of an overarching authority, like the World Government. Though that interpretation may not be in line with the upright meaning, given a pirates unlawful opposition to the organization. Or it could represent you taking charge and becoming a leader.”

Me and Luffy exchange a look. “Yeah, I don’t lead things, so not that one,” I shrug.

Hawkins dips his head in acquiesce, then taps the last uncovered card. “My my, things really are changing for you. The karmic cycle turns, and you have no say in it. I do hope you’ve been doing things you wouldn’t mind being done unto you,” he says with a wry smile.

Everyone's eyes shift to the last card in the lineup, but Hawkins just steeples his fingers and leans back in his chair.

“So what you’re saying is fate’s gonna fuck me in the ass,” I summarize, making Drake choke on his drink again. “Seems about right.” That’s not really anything I didn’t already know.

“That’s one way to look at it,” he concedes.

“Fate’s got to fight me first!” Luffy announces. “I could take fate in a fight, right?”

Robin starts snickering and I give him a fond look of exasperation. “Yeah, of course, cosmic forces tremble at the mere thought of you,” I say sarcastically before blinking. “Actually, scratch the sarcasm — you could beat up fate like Jesus in a back alley brawl behind a Denny’s.”

“What the hell were half of those words supposed to mean?” Drake asks, bewildered.

“Denny’s is the thinnest point between realities,” I say sagely. *Well, besides Domino’s parking lots, I guess.* “You go dumpster diving there; bam, you’re suddenly swimming in the multiverse. If it’s past 3 AM in the parking lot; bam, you’re running into the incarnation of God and the ghost of Ronald Regan playing Go Fish. You trip over one of the curbs; bam, suddenly you’re in ancient Egypt and Cleopatra is throwing a carbonated drink in your face. You just never know what could happen.”

It’s important to mention that I have never been to a Denny’s.

“Ed what, and I cannot stress this enough, *the fuck?”* Zoro says slowly. I shrug.

“Denny’s,” Hawkins murmurs, tattooed forehead furrowing. “I should like to see such a place.”

I’m not touching that with a twenty foot pole.

“What are you doing?” a voice says behind me.

I jump a fucking foot in the air with a shriek. “Holy mother of Christ! How the fuck do you keep doing that?!” I yell, hunching over the table and staring as Urouge sits down at one of the remaining chairs.

“I just walked over. I really don’t know how to help you,” he says mildly.

“For such a big guy, you sure are stealthy,” Zoro mutters, licking rum up the side of his cup where it spilled over.

“I saw him coming,” Hawkins declares.

“You’re also facing the direction he was coming *from,”* I point out.

“I noticed him approaching,” Robin says gently.

“Are me and Zoro just idiots, then?” I ask incredulously.

“You? Absolutely,” Zoro says firmly. “Me? No.” I make an offended face.

“I also didn’t notice him, but I was mostly paying attention to my takoyaki,” Luffy states.

“Your situational awareness is also duller than a rusty sword,” I deadpan, quickly flashing a glance at Drake as I say it.

“Hey, watch it with the rusty sword talk,” Zoro grumbles.

“Sorry, didn’t know you were still in mourning,” I say breezily.

“I will throw my drink in your face. I will throw this whole drink in your face, and time it so it all ends up in your eyes and mouth,” he bites back.

“I will navigate my ass back to Thriller Bark and dance on Yubashiri’s grave Zoro, don’t test me—”

“Are you from a sky island, perchance?” Robin interrupts, leaning her head on her hand, propped on the table by an elbow.

“Yes, ma’am,” Urouge responds politely.

Robin hums, and suddenly the two of them are in a fully blown discussion I cannot for the life of me follow the speed of. I blink slowly at that unlikely friendship, then slowly turn back to the group at large.

“I don’t think we’ll be hearing from those two for a while,” I sigh.

“Can… can you guys hear anything they’re saying?” Drake asks incredulously, watching them talk like an exhibit at the zoo. “Can they even hear us?”

I shrug. “Eh, 50/50 chance a bomb could go off and she could keep him engrossed in conversation.”

“That’s… normal for her?” he asks dubiously, squinting between me and Robin.

“She’s just that sword of person,” I say with a hand wave, winking when Drake narrows his eyes at me.

Zoro snrks, having caught onto what I’m doing. Luffy hands me a piece of takoyaki and I’m forced to acknowledge I have no idea where he got more, because his plate is full again.

“Anyway, did Law hit you guys with the ‘how many people have you killed’ opener too?” I ask.

Hawkins raises a non-existent eyebrow. Drake sighs. “Yeah. Strange guy.”

I shrug. “I think he’s fun, but really, what a shit line,” I snicker.

“You answered it immediately,” Zoro points out.

“You did you,” I shoot back.

“I said fucktons, you asked if zombies count. We are not the same,” Zoro denies.

“Zombies?” Drake repeats incredulously.

I throw my head back and bark out a laugh. “I didn’t get a straight answer, either!” I turn to our guests. “Ok so imagine you’re in a dark hallway, your friend just murdered a lady in the bathroom you’re standing outside of, and suddenly a half rotting dude who looks like he’s made of leather rolls up. Literally what else was I supposed to do but fight him?”

“How… how do you even end up in that situation?” Drake asks, bemused.

I put my hands up. “It’s really not my fault we got shoved in the plot of Scooby Doo on Zombie Island without the werecats. Plus, that son of a bitch had swords! And you know how I am with swords,” I say slyly, reaching over to elbow Zoro, who smirks. I turn back to Drake. “I get impaled a lot,” I say suggestively, as an explanation and a sex joke and another Sword reference because I'm efficient like that.

I don’t actually get impaled all that often, now that I think about it. It was really just John — usually it’s blunt force trauma. And walls. And sometimes getting shot.

…Damn. Looking back, I’m *dogshit* at dodging.

“I will be taking my leave now,” Hawkins announces, getting to his feet and swiping his cards from the table, save for the still unturned one.

I put my hands on the table to push myself up. “Already? Well, I’ll walk you back to your ship.” I suppose it is getting late enough, we started pretty deep in the afternoon; so sunset is probably not far off.

I stop when he puts a hand up. “Perhaps you should check that card, first,” he suggests, turning around and starting to walk.

I frown after him, then frown at the very first card he placed on the table. “Are you gonna look?” Luffy asks beside me, eyes darting between Hawkins’ retreating back and I.

I reach out and pick up the card. I suck in a sharp breath.

“What’s that one mean?” Luffy asks again, leaning over my shoulder.

I push up from the table and start jogging after Hawkins.

My legs start burning immediately, but fuck that and fuck professional medical advice, so I keep going. I manage to catch up to him just before the hut/house things give way to the open semi-circle of the bay.

“Hawkins!” I call. He pauses in his step and turns to acknowledge me. I take a second to catch my breath, a little fucking pissed such a short jog winded me so bad, then hold up the Tower card. “You don’t want this back?”

Hawkins smiles, thin, wry and amused. “I have multiples,” he drawls. “Your fate is quite the thing, Detective of the Damned. I will watch it unfold with rapt attention, but quite honestly I’d prefer to do that as far from it as possible.”

I huff a weak laugh, mimicking his wry smile with one of my own. “Fair enough. Safe travels then, Basil Hawkins. Let’s hope our next meeting is just as amicable.”

*That is to say; I will kick your **ass** if when we fight Kaido you get in the way.*

He gives me a low chuckle, then turns on his heel and continues on the way to his ship, raising a single hand as a wave without looking back. “Best of luck with your upheaval, E. D. Domino.”

I lean against the hut/house thing I stopped beside and watch him ascend onto his ship, and don’t startle when I see Drake lean onto the house opposite me, arms crossed and expression sharp.

“You leaving as well?” I ask, light and not looking, knowing damn well that is not why he is over here.

“I think you and I need to have a chat, best suited away from an audience,” he says flatly.

“Aw, don’t sound so cold. We can sword out our problems, right?” I say with faux innocence and just a bit of mocking, glancing at him from under hooded eyes and lowered lashes.

I don’t startle when he suddenly surges forward and slams a hand into the wall beside my head, expression frigid as he crowds in close. “What do you know?!” he demands harshly.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say calmly, staring up at him evenly. I mean on the inside I’m losing a bit of my shit because this motherfucker is taller than Kid, he’s way over 7’ and I can honestly say I DO NOT LOVE THAT.

“Don’t play dumb, it doesn’t suit you,” he bites out.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I say with a smirk, relaxing into the building and crossing my arms.

Drake growls. Like honest to god growls. “Let me be frank. I don’t want to fight the rest of your crew to get out of here after I *kill you,* so you either start talking or I bury my teeth in your neck and we — that being me and your *ghost* — see how far I can get in my ship before anyone notices your absence.”

Well damn.

“What is it with you government types and threatening to bite my throat out in ways that really shouldn’t be as sexy as they are?” I mutter under my breath.

Drake jolts back, face going red and sputtering before he regains his wits. *“* What *exactly* do you know?” he demands again, this time with an incredulous and slightly flustered edge.

I heave a sigh and lean my head back. Maybe giving away my knowledge of his continued involvement with the government for a sex joke was not the play, but whatever.

“That depends on a couple things,” I start. “One; is my only motivation for answering you not killing me, and two; will you back the fuck up if I tell you because your breath smells like rum and as much as I love a good necking as much as the next pirate, this is a bit public for my taste.”

The red on Drake’s face blows out, dying his skin all the way to his chest and then some. “Please, for the love of all that’s good, just tell me what you know so I can never speak to you again,” he begs.

I can’t help but cackle, because this really is basically effortless. “I wanna feel bad for fucking with you, truly I do, but I can’t when you make it so *fucking easy,”* I wheeze out.

“What do you *want?”* he asks, nearly desperate.

I tap my chin and think it over. “A favour,” I decide. “To be cashed in at any time, with guarantee you will at least *try* to follow through.”

Drake scowls. “I want limits on that thing,” he demands.

I roll my eyes. “How about this; I won’t make you divulge any military secrets. That limit enough for you?” Not like I even *need* his military secrets. I doubt he knows much of anything Jonah couldn’t find for me or that I don’t know already. He was a… Rear Admiral, wasn’t he? That’s high up, but not ‘told the Deep Important Secrets™’ high.

He stares at me with narrowed eyes while he considers it. He glances back in the direction the party is, then back at me. “If it isn’t something you would ask someone on your own crew to do, then don’t ask it. I won’t do a suicide mission for you,” he declares.

I shrug. “Fair enough. I’m not asking you to kill yourself for me, it’s just a favour. Maybe I’m really gonna need 1,000 berri for a vending machine one day or something.”

Drake moves his face away from mine and up a bit to stare heavenward and mutter some kind of prayer for patience under his breath before going back to being deadly serious. “Fine, deal. Now *spill.”*

“Let’s start simple. I know you’re still employed by the Marines,” I state. He twitches. “Obviously I know about Sword. I think the jokes made that clear.”

“Yes. Crystal,” he grits out. “Is it a hobby of yours to make jokes about state secrets and nearly blow deep covers?”

“Funny you mention it, yes, actually,” I respond, tilting my head with a smile and thinking about Vivi in a stupid costume with a cannon, twitching and horrified as I nearly say her name on our way to Whiskey Peak.

Drake’s expression is priceless and I don’t think I could describe it if I had a thesaurus and years to arrange it poetically.

“So how exactly do you know that?” he asks in a strangled voice.

I throw my head back and laugh. “A detective never reveals their secrets! Anyway, let me put your mind a bit at ease. I know maybe a handful of Sword members, but I have no interest in sharing that information or exploiting it in any way. Honestly I don’t even know half of what you’re doing — fucking with people is just my modus operandi.”

His brow furrows, scrunching up his domino mask. “I really don’t understand your goal at all,” he admits.

I shrug again. “You really don’t have to. I’m not a particularly good person or any kind of upstanding citizen, but I’m not an asshole on purpose and I have no interest in ruining your life just because.”

“You’re a pirate,” he says slowly, “and I work for the Marines. And you’re saying that’s… not reason enough to want to ruin my life..?”

I make a vague hand-wavey gesture. “It really isn’t. The Marines’ are a bullshit organization and the World Government can go fuck itself, but Sword seems like the least shit part of all that mess. You’re making the best of the hand you’ve been dealt. Besides, it’d be hypocritical of me to hate you just because you’re a Marine — I *do* have Marine friends, you know.”

Drake blinks twice, finally back up out of my space and just kinda standing awkwardly, stance stilted and arms straight at his sides. “You… do,” he says slowly, not really posing it as a question but kind of implying that it is.

I hum and nod. “Yup. I think — scratch that — I *know* you’d like a couple of them,” I laugh, thinking of Coby in particular, then laughing a bit harder when I think of something. “You know, the Supernovas of my crew actually helped one of them get his job! A bit ironic we’re stocking the infantry who try to kill us, hah?”

Drake looks around like he’s desperately hoping someone is going to jump out and tell him he’s being punked. Predictably, that does not happen.

I reach up (much higher than I would strictly like to, but this guy is fucking *massive)* and pat him on the shoulder, pushing off the hut/house and starting back towards the party. “Good chat, but I’m quite parched. So let’s get back, hm?” I say lightly, not looking back as I walk.

After a beat I hear his footsteps follow.

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Instead of sitting in a chair when I get back, like I absolutely should, I just flop over Zoro’s back and lean my head over his shoulder. “Schnapps,” I prompt, making grabby hands on either side of his face.

“Ok, you goddamn weirdo,” he scoffs, fishing the bottle out of his haramaki and passing it back.

I pop the cork out, take a long swig, savour the taste, then shove the cork back in and drop it back into his lap. “Alright I’m sustained for another couple hours,” I declare, resting my head on the back of his.

I see Drake re-enter the party from a different avenue than I had taken, and sit down at an empty table, very pointedly not looking my way.

“Did he finally get fed up with the dick jokes and try to proposition you?” Zoro asks, clearly noticing what’s happening.

I cackle. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Ed!” Brook calls. I look up and swivel my head around until I find him, sitting at the table housing Scratchmen Apoo. He waves me over with a skeletal hand and I laboriously separate myself from Zoro to make my way there.

I plop down into the chair beside Brook and give them both a smile. “How’s it hanging, fellas? Party good?”

“Good party,” Apoo confirms, doing a mocking toast with his rum before taking a swig.

“Mr. Scratchmen here tells me you volunteered some harmonica-aided jamming. I didn’t know you played!” Brook says joyfully.

I laugh, shrugging with a shake of my head. “Playing is overselling it a bit, my range of knowledge on that thing is… limited.”

“Any skill is a skill to be honed,” he says sagely.

“True enough,” Apoo agrees. “I mean, I’m intermediate at best on half the instruments I play, but that’s still better than most people and more than twice as your average musician.”

“A jack of all trades,” I hum. “Admirable, and relatable.”

“So do you fancy a jam? You did offer,” Apoo says cheekily.

I feel my face split into a sharp grin, yanking the fucking harmonica I have genuinely no idea how I acquired out of my pocked, and jumping onto my chair and planting a foot on the table. “You bet your ass! I ONLY KNOW PIANO MAN ON THIS THING!” I holler. Then I just bust it the fuck out.

After playing the first part, I take a deep breath. “This song’s got piano, bass, guitar, accordion, drums and a little mandolin! Get jazzy and improvise!” I instruct, banging out the drum beat on my shoulder and chest. “IT’S NINE O’CLOCK ON A SATURDAY—”

It's a slapdash fucking *mess* — it doesn't sound all that similar to Billy Joel's absolute masterpiece unless you're not playing very close attention, but it's also beautiful in a way I can't really put into words.

Brook's violin playing is incredible, somehow managing to blend into the music and elevate it in a way you never expect violin to do until it's happening. Apoo is plucking the baseline into the middle portion of one of his arms, the hand of it playing his teeth like piano keys, and his abdomen stretching like an accordion whenever he deems it appropriate. He's almost one-man-band-ing it, and it's fucking impressive how he manages to keep track of everything he's doing.

On my part, I play the shit out of my (now that I'm thinking about it, I might have stolen this thing) harmonica, sing the lyrics I had long since memorized with gusto (really, it pays to have a go-to karaoke song), and stomp the drumline into the table. My legs are sore almost immediately, and my lungs are complaining like an annoyed toddler, but I honestly couldn't care less.

I count them into choruses and verses, indicating when there's refrains, and just savour the moment as much as I possibly can. I use all the bullshit I can remember from two or three years of choir, and anything I vaguely think happened when I sat in on a middle school friend's glee club meeting.

I yell lyrics I think will hit different louder — things like "DAVEY, WHO'S STILL IN THE NAVY," with a subtle wink at Drake, or "IT'S BETTER THAN DRINKING ALONE!" and of course, screaming "MAN, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!" at the top of my lungs.

If when people start clapping along to the beat and I hear voices join in on the final chorus I nearly cry, that's no one's business but my own. If anyone has the balls to ask, I'll just say the setting sun got in my eyes as it kissed the ocean's horizon.

We close out our improved piece of fucking art with long lingering notes, and the party rewards us with a loud round of applause. I laugh loud and uncontrollable, giving a wide dramatic bow and jumping off the table so I can hug my Captain as he bounds over.

"I knew that one! Not all the words, but I knew it!" he chirps, straw hat hanging down his back and forehead to my shoulder.

I press my cheek into his hair and grin, hold back tears, hurt and relish.

Chapter End Notes

When I tell you I actually fucking busted out my tarot deck to write Hawkins. That's the actual spread I pulled. I haven't done tarot since the fucking pandemic. What the FUCK is up with THAT—

Oh it didn't occur to me until I was setting this chapter up, the sword puns may not translate into other languages very well. (Sword and sort sound very similar in English.) My apologies to my readers who use translation services, I promise I still love you.

If there is one thing you can always count on with Ed and I it's that if a sex joke can be made, it will be made without hesitation.

I am here to use absolute fucking bangers as plot devices and straddle the line of songfic like a raging bull. If Oda didn't want this to happen he shouldn't have given me damn musicians to exploit.

GODDAMNIT I WANNA GO SEE LOS CAMPESINOS! LIVE THE TICKETS ARE ONLY LIKE $25 BUT ALL MY FRIENDS WORK AND MY MOM DOESN'T LIKE THEIR MUSIC I'M BEING SABATOGED LIFE IS SO CRUUUUUEEEELLLLLL TOT like please sir I've loved that stupid band for over 8 years I deserve this—

Chapter 102: Chapter One Hundred and Two: No One Lives Forever And The Devil Never Sleeps Alone

Chapter Summary

The Devil Never Sleeps - Iron & Wine

I give her a flat look. “I’ve never not read too much into something in my life, but go ahead.”

Chapter Notes

Did we need four chapters of the Supernova party? Not really but I was having fun so it is what it is. What's that you said? There's still one more? AAAAAAAUUGHHHHHHHHHHHH.

I CHOPPED ALL MY HAIR OFF. Yay!

Anyway I love this song so much I am physically sick with it. I have to listen to it twice every time it comes up in my playlist so I can sing both parts. I adore it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m gonna go sit in the corner all mysterious-like so people come over and divulge their secrets to me,” I murmur into Luffy’s ear, taking the cup of apple juice Camie hands me and sliding my arm off his shoulders so I can move away.

“Ok, have fun,” he says with a smile, taking his own cup of juice Camie presents him.

So I go sit my happy ass at an empty table on the outskirts and wait. It takes less than five minutes for that shit to work.

“So, what can I do for you?” I ask pleasantly, smiling and folding my hands on the table.

Jewelry Bonney grimaces at me. “You totally planned this,” she says flatly, spinning *her* cup of juice in her hands. Who knew apple juice would be such a hit?

My smile stretches wider. “In fact, I did. Nothing is more likely to get you a direct conversation than a perfectly presented opportunity. So will it be a question or a proposal?”

She scrunches her nose at me. “I’ve got a question, Detective,” she decides with slow syllables.

“You can call me Ed,” I offer.

“Sure, Ed,” she agrees easily. *See, Law, that’s how that’s supposed to go.* “Don't read too much into this,” Bonney warns before getting to it.

I give her a flat look. “I’ve never not read too much into something in my life, but go ahead.”

Bonney’s nose scrunches up. “That’s reassuring. So… uh… you were on… Thriller Boat?”

“Thriller Bark, but yes,” I correct with a nod.

She nods as well. “And you fought two Warlords,” she continues. I nod again. “So… how were they? Like, did you have trouble with them being *Warlords* and all, were they stronger than you expected, did they seem to be in… like… good condition..?” she slowly eeks out, face twitching and mouth twisting into a grimace.

I stare at her blankly. “Ok, I’m gonna need a more direct question because *hah?”* Bonney makes a frustrated noise and buries her face in her hands. “You can, like, speak freely. This conversation stays between us,” I offer.

“Were the Warlords like… previously injured in any way you could tell..?” she eases out.

I take a sip of my juice. “Not that I could tell. I didn’t see Moria until we were already knee deep in a fight, and Kuma looked at the very least uninjured when he arrived.”

“What does that mean?” she demands. “‘At the very least uninjured,’ what does that imply?”

I frown at a spot over her shoulder. “Well, he was a very… *blank* guy. You could chalk that up to personality, but it almost seemed robotic,” I say carefully.

“Robotic, huh? That’s… interesting,” she says in a strangled tone. “Can you elaborate on that?”

I shrug a little helplessly. “I mean, he had like no inflection on his voice, and he didn’t really say much aside from what he had to, and he only stuck around as long as I asked of him, and he didn’t do much of anything he wasn’t told to unless it was his own kinda compromise…” I pause for a second. “Wait this just sounds like I’m talking about autism. There was also the Sanji-kicked-him-and-it-nearly-broke-his-leg thing, but that could have just been Haki. Alright maybe my point has no basis, but let’s call it a vibe.”

Bonney stares at me with a look of dead confusion and gap-mouthed bewilderment. “Ok, I’m gonna need a more direct answer because *hah?”* she says, parroting my earlier statement.

I groan and roll my head back. “He was kind to us in a really roundabout way I’m gonna be feeling for weeks, if not years, and sat in a corner for like a day or something waiting until I woke up because I asked him to. We had a drink, agreed it was a lovely meeting and we should not do it again for a very long time if we can help it, then he left. That’s kinda all I got for you.”

She makes a thin sound of something like disappointment and frustration.

“Oh — and he was apparently at Marineford and Marie Jois like, at the very least a couple days ago while they discuss getting a new Warlord. Boom, free information, on the house,” I add.

That has her brow furrowing and her chin jutting out in consideration. “Hm. Ok,” she mutters. “I don’t really know what I was expecting, but thanks, I guess. I’m gonna get more takoyaki,” she decides, rising to her feet and staring down into her cup as she walks away.

Damn, talking about that guy really kills her powers of observation. She didn’t even catch on that I knew she was only really asking about Kuma. I watch her go, then shrug and go back to waiting with my juice and resting my eyes.

“Pardon me,” a voice suddenly says.

I yelp and nearly fall out of my chair. “This is ridiculous, you have to be doing this on purpose,” I accuse, making a face at Urouge.

He shrugs with an indifferent expression. “I’m truly not.”

“You wanna take a seat?” I offer, gesturing to Bonney’s abandoned chair.

Urouge shakes his head. “That’s alright. I just thought as host I’d let you know I’m departing.”

“Oh, ok,” I say with a frown. “Let me walk you back to your ship.”

He shakes his head again. “No need for that,” he says, giving a pointed look to my shaking hands and jittering leg. I self consciously tuck said leg under my chair and flatten my hands on the table. “The food was delicious and the conversation was good. Your performance wasn’t half bad either,” he compliments, wide mouth quirked up in a smile.

I smile back. “Thank you. Oh, before you go, I know you were chatting with Robin but did she mention our adventure on a sky island?” I ask.

He chuckles, voice low and gravely. “She did. She also mentioned the… *man* you fought, and your personal hand in it. On that too, I must compliment your work,” he draws with a broad smile, and I don’t think I’m imagining the vindictive undertone. “There’s many Birkans that would be delighted by the news.”

“That’s good to hear,” I say quietly, turning my smile to the table.

“May we meet in the New World, Detective,” Urouge says in farewell, giving one last chuckle before turning his heel.

I nod my head and watch his retreating back as he leaves, exiting the party area and disappearing behind the hut/house things.

“You sure are popular,” another voice says. I don’t screech this time, but I do jump. Apoo laughs and takes one of the seats. “And that guy wasn’t wrong, the performance was top notch, not to toot my own horn,” he jokes, pressing his chin to make a horn noise.

I cackle at that. “You’re like a living soundboard, it’s so fucken awesome.”

“I do try,” he says humbly. “Anyway I’m just letting you know I’m headed out too, my crew will get antsy if we don’t get a move on.”

“Ah, did you want your picture first?” I ask curiously. He really doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to not take advantage of an offer of any kind.

Apoo throws his head back and laughs. “It’s adorable that you think I didn’t already take one. Or twelve!”

I squint at him. “I can’t tell if that makes me uncomfortable or not.”

I mean, way back when I used to hate hate *hate* people taking my picture — middle through high school if you came near me with a camera it was hands *thrown.* And that's coming from the most photogenic child in existence. Now though… well I'm way more comfortable in my body, for one. I guess constantly being in danger does wonders for my figure. Plus all the bounty posters have kinda acclimatized me to the idea.

"Yeah, whatever, as long as you got my good side," I say flippantly. "You want an escort to the port?"

"My presence has been known to make people weak in the knees," he says with a wink. "You stay seated, it may be better for your health."

I laugh as Apoo makes a jazzy exit, a short riff on shoulder tambourines as he… I don't know. It's a weird combination of moonwalking and the Charleston shuffle and something I'm 70% sure is Irish dancing, for some reason. I do not have the words for it.

I'm left to my peace after that. It gets to the point where I'm resting my head on my arms and watching where Luffy is animatedly telling a reluctantly interested group some kinda story involving… I think something gets eaten, judging by whatever he's trying to convey with his hands.

Anyway, I actually start dozing off to the point where I only realize my eyes were slipping shut when someone bangs on the table. I jolt upright with a swear as Kid and Killer take seats, the bang having originated from Kid slamming his drink down.

He gives me a mean grin as I glower at him. "You suck," I say matter-of-factly.

"You swallow," he retorts without hesitation.

"Nope, husband said we cannot bang," I state. "I can initiate intercourse with any single other person on this planet, but not you."

“I DON’T WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU—”

“Domino, you seem to have put yourself in a position for private conversations,” Killer interrupts Kid’s yelling, smoothly jerking his chair back an inch by the backrest. “Is there something you’re hoping to gain by that?”

I ignore Kid’s fuming to give Killer my full attention and a smile. “Feel free to call me Ed. And good eye — talking in a big group is great for establishing rapport and breaking the tension, but you don’t get the nitty gritty of people or a genuine connection until you’re 1 on 1. Or 1 on 2, as it were.”

Killer hums and Kid scoffs. I continue ignoring him. “Who would even *want* to talk to you?” he mutters, as if he isn’t the one who sat at *my* goddamn table.

“So, what have you been saying to everyone else?” Killer asks.

I shrug. “What they asked. And good gravy gracious, I thought you *knew* I had nothing important to say!” I say dramatically with a mocking gasp.

“What do you mean, you don’t think you have anything worthwhile to say?” Killer asks with a tilt of his head.

“Oh, no not at all. I’ve got lots of interesting shit to say,” I deny.

“Then why say that?” Killer asks, sounding confused.

“Because knee-jerk over here,” I say, jerking my head at Kid. “WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?” I shout in unison with him, making pointed eye contact. “He said I was uninteresting.”

“You son of a—” Kid growls while Killer snickers quietly.

“So, question or proposal? Or the secret third option; I can psychoanalyse you and give you cryptic advice,” I offer, going back to ignoring Kid and giving Killer an eyebrow wiggle.

Killer makes an amused huff. “What kind of advice could your stupid arse possibly give?” Kid snarks. I keep ignoring him and keep my smile trained on Killer.

“Psychoanalyse us how?” he asks.

I tilt my head. “Well, I like to start with a question and just extrapolate from there.”

“Well, ask your damn question,” Kid demands gruffly.

I spare him a single side glance with an eye roll and a sigh. “Your crew is well known for their particularly high civilian kill count, what’s your justification for that?”

Kid scoffs again. “They deserved it. If they laugh at my dream, we slaughter the bastards,” he snarls.

I hum lowly and nod. “Do you go out of your way to mention your dream to these people?”

I see Kid make a face out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t bother looking back at him. “I don’t *hide* it, if that’s what you’re asking,” he snaps.

“It wasn’t, but that’s a pretty clear answer,” I say shortly, shifting to a new position and steepling my fingers. “Alright, you ready? I’m about to drop some blunt fucking wisdom that may provoke a violent response, but if you hit me you’re fighting your way off this base,” I warn.

Killer shakes his head. “Don’t worry about that. Go ahead.”

I give him a sweet smile. “Thank you. So it’s obvious you have some kind of deep seated insecurity around your dream,” I open with. Kid, predictably, tries to lunge. Killer stops him. “You intentionally provoke a reaction out of strangers then kill like you’re trying to prove a point. I wouldn’t put you being bullied as a kid out of the question, but the origin of the insecurity isn’t as important as the insecurity itself.”

“I will rip your tongue out of your face and use it to scrub my decks,” Kid growls.

“That’s gross. And you scrub your own decks? Maybe you’re more responsible than I gave your credit for,” I muse. “Anyway, the whole murder thing makes it obvious you have a very juvenile ability to deal with stress, and frankly it’s childish that you swing for the instant gratification of homicide in a situation like that.”

“Did you just call murder childish?” Killer butts in to ask, not nearly as mad as Kid is, but also vaguely displeased.

I shrug again. “I mean, yeah. You lack the patience, common sense and reasoning any other functional adult has, resorting to anger and violence because you’ve never been taught how to process your emotions or because you simply don’t give enough of a shit to learn,” I say plainly. “Now we’ve established your senseless violence is compensating for something,” I pause to flick my eyes to Kid’s hideous pants like earlier, “but how can I turn that into advice?”

“You know where you can shove your advice?” Kid snarls.

“I’d like to hear the advice,” Killer says.

“My first suggestion is get a therapist,” I deadpan. “If that’s not an option, learn some basic fucking communication skills, you troglodyte. But that’s really good advice for everyone, so I’ll give you something a bit more specific. Do you guys have a plan for once you hit the New World? You don’t have to tell me the plan, just if you have one.”

“We do,” Killer answers.

“Let me guess, you want to do something big and flashy off the bat to prove you aren’t fucking around. You want to give your dream merit by doing something people can’t ignore or dismiss because it’s just that ballsy,” I drawl, smirking at the glance the pair exchange. “If I had to make a shot in the dark here, I’d say you plan to go fight an Emperor.”

The look on Kid’s face is fucking priceless.

“You want me to guess which?” I ask, wiggling my eyebrows again.

“As if you could,” Kid sputters.

“Watch me,” I smirk. “Not Whitebeard, because be honest with yourself, that’s too many people who’d try and get revenge on your ass to even be an option. Kaido and Big Mom both are pretty fuckin’ fortified, with territories and bases they don’t go out of their way to leave and take effort to infiltrate. That leaves the youngest of them, the free spirit who doesn’t tend to take a fleet with him everywhere and locks you should be jealous of, Red Haired Shanks,” I finish grandly.

They both stare at me for a moment.

“Ok, advice,” Kid demands.

Hah, fucken gottem.

“Best advice I got for you there; don’t fucking bother,” I state.

“The fuck you mean, *‘don’t bother.’* That’s shite advice!” Kid yells.

I groan and roll my eyes. “Good god, we’re all rookies outta Paradise — granted, the best of the rookies there is — do you honestly believe you stand a snowball’s chance in hell against a seasoned fucking veteran and, need I repeat, *Emperor?”* I stress. “You try that shit and you only get away because they let you — and it’ll still cost you an arm and a proverbial leg.”

Literally.

“That’s dumb. Your advice is dumb,” Kid dismisses immediately.

I drop my head back and roll my eyes heavenward. “Your funeral. Advice is advice for a reason, I guess. No need to follow it if you think you know better.”

“We’re fucking strong. Unlike you Strawhat pussies we don’t shy away from a challenge,” Kid spits. “Do you have any idea how high our kill count is? I don’t give a *shite* he’s an Emperor, Red Hair is going down.”

“That’s almost impressively naive,” I shoot back. “You think being able to off a bunch of defenceless civies puts you on par with him? Hell, even if you can corner him, that’s just the start of your problems. Do you even know what you’re up against? His main crew might be the smallest of the Emperors, but that should scare you more than relieve you.”

“Why?” Killer asks, his shoulder set in a sharp line.

“Have you considered that he has less people because he doesn’t *need* more people? That’s a crew of curbstompers, and you’re gonna have to fight through their asses to get to Shanks. For fucks sake, you’d have to fight *Benn Beckman.* You think you could beat Benn *fucking* Beckman?” I rant.

“I’m not a coward,” Kid hisses, baring his teeth and slamming a hand into the table. I go quiet and meet his glare head on with an even stare of my own. “You think I give a shite if he’s stronger than us? Putting my life on the line is what it means to be dedicated to my dream, and if you think you can tell me what to do, the next corpse I make will be you. If I die pushing for what I want, that’s fair trade.”

“Dying for your dream isn’t dedication,” I snap back. “You can dress it up all you want, killing yourself is *just* killing yourself. Whether it’s pride or a death wish, refusal of a strategic retreat or due preparedness is just pigheaded stubbornness and will land you in a grave.”

“Who are you to decide what my dream will cost?” he snarls. “None of that shite matters, if a death wish is what it takes, so be it.”

“That’s your problem,” I say quietly. “You feed death to your dream like enough fuel will get it off the ground. Pursuing your dream isn’t a transaction, it’s faith. The sooner you can get that through your skull, the better it’ll be for everyone.”

“My methods are my own damn business,” Kid spits. “What would you even know about death, anyway? You think one or two lives on your hands makes you acquaintances?!”

“I know death more intimately than you could possibly hope to imagine,” I seethe, shooting to my feet and making my chair screech backwards. “It’s lived in my head since I was 12 years old, it’s followed in my footsteps and taken residency in my bed. I’ve felt the abruptness of its hands as a thought and as cold and unforgiving as a *moving vehicle,* so don’t you *dare* insinuate you know it better than I do. You could end a thousand lives with your bare fucking hands and still never fathom my relationship with death — the other side of that *dedication* you’re so goddamn proud of.”

Kid blinks at me, momentarily thrown by my speech. The second I see his jaw set and his mouth open, I spin on my heel and storm away from the table, barely remembering to grab my drink as I go.

I stalk all the way over to Bege’s table and stand with my back rigid. “Do you mind if I join you?” I ask stiffly.

Bege raises an eyebrow, blowing a smoke ring and glancing back to where I came from then back to me. “Go ahead,” he grunts, gesturing to a chair with his cigar.

I drop into it and smack my forehead into the table.

*You stupid fucking bastard, why the ever loving **fuck** did the second closest ever you've come to speaking the truth of your existence into the world have to be because **Eustass motherfucking KID** managed to piss you off?*

"I dunno what just happened, but it looked pretty pathetic," Bege states.

I peek up at him through where my arms have come up to wrap around my head. "You don't say," I mumble dryly.

"You'se did remarkably well keeping your composure right up till the end, to be fair," he adds, waving his cigar in a vague motion. "I woulda lost it on that schmook immediately. Talking to him is like getting an appendix removed."

"More like getting a cavity filled," I mutter. "At least for an appendix they sedate you. This is just shitty freezing they stick in the wrong side of your mouth."

Bege lets out a rough laugh that's mostly a snort. "True enough."

I roll my head over so I'm looking at him the opposite angle I was before. "Has this little shindig been alright for you? Nobody bothered you and the wine and food was to your liking?" I ask earnestly.

He snorts some smoke out his nose. "No disturbances I can't tune out. And the wine," he swirls his glass around and I have to acknowledge Camie did not provide one so he obviously brought his own and that's kind of hilarious, "excellent."

I smile at him. "I'm glad. I'm sure a gentleman such as yourself would generally prefer a more refined event, so I appreciate you sticking it out."

Bege scoffs. “I don’t want thanks or appreciation. You and I are not indebted to one another, this is a casual affair. This isn’t the setting for gratitude, and nothing is owed between us this time.”

I give him a lopsided smile. “Next time we have a get-together, I’ll make sure to actually wear formal attire.”

He huffs another dry laugh and reaches for his bottle of wine — the second one, I notice — and inclies it with an eyebrow raised in suggestion. “Would you deny a glass?”

I shake my head without dropping my smile. “I don’t have the palette for wine, or any particular fondness for alcohol beyond the bottle my swordsman is babysitting. I will happily drink my juice with you, however,” I say, dragging my finger around the rim of my apple juice.

He snorts. “Everyone’s got a vice, I suppose. You’se got a strange way about you, E. D. Domino, but you’se manage to keep it from bein’ a bad thing fairly well.”

I blink a couple times before laughing. “Thank you, I guess. To my strange way?” I joke, lifting my cup for a cheer.

“To you’se strange way,” he agrees with a wry smirk, clinking his wine glass against my juice.

I hadn’t really noticed how dark it was getting until the place is suddenly lit up, I blink and swallow my mouthful to look around. Franky and the Rosy Life Riders had truly outdone themselves, the whole place is strung up in lights, with candles in the windows of some of the surrounding buildings.

“I think that’s my cue to get goin’, don’t wanna stick around with you schmooks longer than I gotta,” Bege says, draining his glass and making it disappear in the folds of his jacket. “You don’t mind if I take my last bottle for the road, do ya?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Go right ahead. Safe travels, Bege.”

“Safe travels, Domino,” he returns, slightly dipping his head before heading for the bar, retrieving his final promised bottle, and heading out of the area.

Just one Supernova left to chat with.

Chapter End Notes

Guys I like Bege can you tell. I also have beef with Kid. Can you tell. CAN YOU TELL.

It's me writing that last part at 4 AM because I REALLY HAD TO GO TO BED. (I had this written for the notes from when I wrote the chapter but considering I was up until 6 AM Friday night working on a different chapter I'm starting to think this is a me problem.)

But oh my god y'all... that chapter..... nay THAT ARC..... Sabaody is about to hit you like a ton of bricks right to the nose..... I will pray for you.

Next chapter is nice tho!!!

Chapter 103: Chapter One Hundred and Three: May You Do Some Good Where You Go

Chapter Summary

Great Pirates - The Mountain Goats

“I read him to fucking filth, bitch I’d be mad too,” I deadpan.

Chapter Notes

Law deserves to be made to laugh until he cannot fucking breath and if no one else will step up to the plate I WILL. I WILL DO IT!! YOUR HONOUR THE CUNTRY ASKS ONLY ONE THING OF ME AND I WILL GLADLY SERVE!!!!

Guys I need to be so honest with you. This arc (and fight me it counts as an arc, this thing has more chapters than Arlong Park did) was just an excuse for me to write Ed flirting with large men. NOT LAW THO LET ME BE SO CLEAR ED AND LAW ARE NOT FLIRTING PLEASE I COUSIN ZONED THE MAN 3 CHAPTERS AGO I DIDN'T WANNA EVEN GIVE MYSELF THE OPTION—

Me before being put on Vyvanse: Appetite suppression? Yeah right won't be a problem my Mind is simply stronger than my Body and I will just keep eating normal.
Me now that I'm on Vyvanse: Why does my tummy hurt/why do I feel so very unwell
My Body, screaming so loud internally the devil can hear it: FEED ME PLEASE YOU GAVE ME A FISTFUL OF CHIPS FOR DINNER I NEED SUSTINANCE PLEASE—
Me: Must be The Weather™
My Body: NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO—

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Eustass-ya looked like he wanted to strangle you,” Law says as a greeting, almost reluctantly slipping into a chair at Bege’s table, which I’ve taken over as my own. Surprisingly, instead of taking the seat opposite mine, he takes the one perpendicular to me.

“I read him to fucking filth, bitch I’d be mad too,” I deadpan.

That actually gets Law to laugh. “What did you say to him?” he asks, leaning forward in his chair and idly twisting his sword by the hilt with the tip of his finger. It looks a little ridiculous because he has to reach up past his head in a way that means his arm is absolutely not in a relaxed position, but he seems to be doing it so unthinkingly it’s probably just habit.

“Well I called him insecure, then childish, and told him he had no emotional regulation and needed a therapist, then said he was compensating for something, then guessed his opening move in the New World, then ripped apart how stupid it was,” I say flippantly. “And he took exception to that.”

Law laughs again, pinching his nose bridge and tilting his head down. “What got *you* to yell at him then?”

“Oh that?” I say dryly. “We seem to have very differing philosophies on what it means to pursue a dream.”

“Oh?” Law muses, a glint in his eyes as he smirks.

I adamantly shake my head. “Nope, not rehashing that argument with you of all people.”

“Me of all people?” Law repeats.

“Nope,” I rebuff.

He rolls his eyes, but seems to accept the non-answer. “So, why is Drake-ya staring at you like he’s afraid you’ll try and eat him?” he drawls, flicking his eyes past my shoulder to where I know the man in question is seated.

“Flirting is a weapon, and oftentimes the strongest in your arsenal,” I say sagely, twisting in my seat to blow Drake a kiss. His face goes red and his eyes fill with the fear of god before he whips around the other direction.

Both me and Law make eye contact before we burst out laughing. I let mine peter off into a groan as I sink further into my chair and allow my head to hang back. “God, this has been so much more exhausting than I thought it’d be, and there hasn’t even been a big fight.”

“I’d imagine,” Law responds, voice strained as his eyes get distant, shuddering like he’s imagining being in my shoes. “In theory it’s such a shit idea I can’t even believe it worked.”

I have to shrug. “We’re good at the impossible, if nothing else.”

Someone clears their throat behind us. Both me and Law turn as Drake shifts his weight from foot to foot, very obviously avoiding eye contact with me. “I thought it courteous to inform you of my departure,” he says stiffly.

“No need to be so formal, sailor. Afterall, we got so acquainted earlier,” I purr, leaning on my hand with a false seductive look in my eyes.

Drake immediately starts sputtering, face bright red and hands twitching while Law poorly hides a snrk behind his hand. “W — What are you *talking about?!”* he squeaks out.

“Oh don’t be so shy, you were so forward earlier. Remember what you said? About your *teeth,* and my *neck?”* I tease, raking my eyes up and down his body and biting my lip.

“Mercy on my soul,” he mutters under his breath, shoulders hitching up to his ears as they spit out steam. Law gives up covering his laughs, folding in half and nearly hitting his head on the table. “I AM LEAVING NOW,” Drake says loudly, spinning on his heel and marching for the exit — sans his dignity.

“Call me, big boy!” I coo after him, tucking hair behind my ear and batting my eyes while doing the Debby Ryan Radio Rebel smirk.

“OH MY *GOD—”* Drake squawks, giving the *fuck up* on poise and just fucking *booking it* out of there.

I burst out laughing so hard I can’t even come close to stopping for the next ten minutes. It gets to the point I’m actually fucking crying because every time I get close to stopping I remember the look of his face before he ran and I’m right back into hysterics. I have a literal stitch in my side and I’m gasping for air around each cackle and wheeze, smacking the table and blindly reaching out for Law as he tries to work himself out of the same state.

We end up just kinda smacking each other’s hands weakly while we wheeze and basically melt all over the table. I’m sure it’s goddamn hilarious for the rest of the remaining party.

“There’s something so deeply wrong with you,” Law finally manages to squeeze out when we get something close to collecting ourselves.

“Inamorato I *know,”* I respond, wiping under my eyes and rubbing my sore cheeks. “Maybe I gotta tack on a real insanity diagnosis onto my already plentiful catalogue.”

“Insanity isn’t a diagnosis,” Law dismisses, making a face at the name. “There’s diagnoses that will *get* you proclaimed legally insane, though.”

“Hm. Interesting,” I murmur. “Hey, did you get a chance to chat with our doctor yet?”

“Briefly. We discussed your application as a method of inducing emesis, but then your Captain started talking about you making his head spin and vomit, and I really didn’t want to be a part of that conversation,” he says flatly.

“He meant that literally. I can literally make people’s heads spin,” I clarify. “And you know something? You’d *love* House MD.”

“I don’t know who that is,” he deadpans. “And I know you can, your swordsman was adamant on explaining you had a Devil Fruit so I wouldn’t get the wrong idea. However,

hearing about the combined idiocy of you and your Captain is exhausting."

"You say that now, but we're entertaining as fuck," I refute.

Law rolls his eyes. "That I have to give you."

There's a moment of silence as we observe one another. "So, you got a question or a proposal?" I ask.

"Question, if I have to pick," he responds dryly.

I chuckle lightly. "I'm not making you ask me anything, just offering direction for the conversation."

He rolls his eyes again. "Earlier you said some… interesting things about Doflamingo. What gave you the impression you spoke of?" His lip twitches up when he speaks, no doubt recalling my hilarious description of the man.

"Honestly? Just a vibe check. Something about his face and the stupid ass way he walks unnerves me," I say with a shrug.

"And the number of Warlords you've fought is purely coincidental? You're not actively working through their ranks and seeking them out?" he pushes.

"Dude if I knew how we kept managing to run into these motherfucks you'd think I'd've tried to fix it by now," I drawl sardonically. "It just. Keeps. *Happening."*

"You take requests?" he asks, a sarcastic smile on his face.

“Hey,” Bonney’s voice says behind us. We turn. She waves. “I’m headed out, it’s late and I wanna pass out. Thanks for the grub, it’s been real,” she says, smile tired but genuine.

“Oh no problem, thanks for sticking around as long as you did,” I dismiss with a smile. “I hope the food was alright. You ate your fill?”

She laughs a little. “If I ate my fill, I’d eat that octopus guy out of house and home. But I had enough, yes. Thanks for feeding me.”

I wave my hand. “It’s really no problem. Next time we meet we’ll see about getting you a full course meal by our chef Sanji, he’s used to dealing with multiple titanic appetites at once, so I promise he can handle yours,” I say warmly.

That poor son of a bitch has been monopolized by Hachi and Pappag for food-making all day, *god* did they even give him a break?

Bonney gives me a sleepy grin that takes up her whole face. “I’ll hold you to that! Catch you later, weirdo!” She gives me a two fingered salute, and starts skipping out of our well lit area.

“I like her,” I announce. “She’s nice to me, unlike *some* people.”

Law scoffs. “If everyone was nice to you I think your ego would sink this base.”

“Alright, *rude,”* I mutter. “True, but rude.”

“Here’s a question for you; did you take part of your Captain’s name when you married?” Law asks, feigning it being an offhand question incredibly poorly while sipping his rum.

“You mean us both having a D. in our names?” I confirm. He hums lightly. “Nah, we both had ‘em before that.”

“That’s quite the coincidence,” he muses, slowly blinking at me. His eyes are so damn intense right now they look like molten goddamn gold, it’s both pretty and unnerving as shit.

“Sure,” I concede, then laugh a little. “Consider Luffy somehow managing to end up snagging a brother with one, too. I’m convinced it’s like gay people, they always *somehow* end up congregating together like a flock of pigeons!”

Law chokes on his drink a little. “One; *what?* What does that *mean?* And two; if he’s his brother why *wouldn’t* he have one?”

“Not biological brothers,” I dismiss. “And I am so right it’s not funny. I had this group of friends when I was a kid, I came out first and somehow every single one of them ended up being queer. I was convinced I fucking subconsciously manipulated them or my gay ass aura infected them or some shit.”

“How the actual fuck would that even work?” he wheezes.

“How should I know? I only stopped thinking about it because one of them said I sounded like a Christian father convincing his kids to stay away from other gay people!” I exclaim.

“That’s so unbelievably dumb,” he mutters, hiding a smile behind his cup. “Maybe you’re onto something with that congregating thing, though.”

“Of course I am,” I say smugly. “I know gay people incredibly well.”

“That isn’t — oh whatever,” Law sighs. “So your Captain and his brother aren’t blood related. Their parents married or something?”

I furrow my brow. “Not as far as I know…?” That would open up some incredibly strange things I don’t think I wanna delve into. “They swore an oath, it’s not some kinda nuclear

family dynamic shit. Oh but this does remind me, I want an answer about what I asked earlier," I demand.

"What?" he asks, mouth pinching up in confusion and drawing my attention to the stud of his labret.

"The dream blunt rotation, duh. Hey, does your piercing fuck up your teeth?" I ask. "I've heard oral piercings can chip your tooth enamel, I wouldn't peg it as a piercing for a doctor."

"The fucking *huh* — I'll get back to that. Yeah, oral piercings can be damaging if you're not careful with them, luckily for me I've got a Devil Fruit that greatly assists," he responds, massaging his nose bridge. "I need to ask, how the *actual fucking god* did I get invited to this 'dream blunt rotation' and what the fuck does this have to do with Strawhat-ya's brother?" he asks with exhausted incredulity.

"God, Devil Fruits are so useful," I mumble. "And what do you mean? I said earlier, we were planning the damn thing with him. And I said you should be invited because *fucking look at you.* Look me in the fucking eyes and tell me you don't smoke weed. I *dare* you," I rant.

Law blinks slowly and stares for a long moment. "...Is Strawhat-ya's brother goddamn Fire Fist Ace?" he asks, sounding so fucking tired I feel bad.

"...Yeah?" I say slowly. "Did… I said that, didn't I?"

Law looks heavenward. "I thought it was a joke. I thought you were joking," he squeezes out.

"So you do smoke, right? Because I'm really not gonna make you come if you don't feel comfortable with drugs," I reassure. Nothing sexy about peer pressure.

Law groans for a long moment. "Yeah. Yeah I smoke. Mostly to relax," he admits with a scrunched up nose.

I shrug. “Fair enough. I’m more of a Sativa person myself. Don’t tell my family though, they’d be very upset about me underage smoking,” I say judiciously before pausing. “I mean you’d probably need a ouija board, but better safe than sorry. There’s gotta be a Devil Fruit out there that lets you speak with ghosts.”

Or would they even have ghosts? Maybe I have a ghost. God, being transmigrated is so complicated.

Law stares blankly for a second. “Orphan, then?”

I shrug. “I guess? I mean, home’s gone along with everyone in it, so some kind of flavour of that.”

Law’s eye’s harden. “Is that so? You have some things in common with Nico Robin-ya?”

“A couple,” I murmur. Not the things he’s probably thinking of, but we are similar in ways I like to hold close.

“Hm,” he hums quietly. “That something you’re going to follow? Do something about?”

I tilt my head, considering. “Hmmmm, I consider myself the vengeful type — a vindictive slut, if you will — but on this… I dunno,” I say honestly.

Law lets out a startled laugh at the name. “A believer in revenge, then?”

“To an extent. I don’t think anyone should be denied their revenge, and I think pursuing it can be noble and well worth it, as long as they can keep from being consumed by it. Life happens when people are plotting revenge,” I respond, swirling around the last of my juice.

“Is that so,” Law mumbles, more to himself than I.

“Hey Law?” I start. He hums. “Judging revenge is kinda hit or miss when you don’t say what it’s about,” I say plainly. He starts so bad I actually flinch too, taken off guard by such a visceral reaction all of a sudden. “Jeez — I’m not saying tell me, especially not if it makes you react like that,” I scold, shaking out my wrist that had banged into the edge of the table.

“I was being general,” he defends.

“Of course,” I agree.

“It was just conversation,” he justifies.

“Alright,” I placate.

“You’re a shit,” he states.

“True enough,” I agree. “But Law?”

He makes a weird hummy croak noise that I would give anything for him to repeat.

I lean in close so Law has to look me in the eyes. He blinks harshly at the proximity. “When you need it, *if* you need it and should you ask, we’ll happily be there to help,” I tell him. At this distance I can see the discoloured patches of skin smattered across his face and neck, ever so slightly lighter than the rest of his tanned skin.

He continues to blink harshly. “I — er — I really don’t think that’s…” he mutters under his breath before sighing, lifting his face and giving me a smirk. “You know what? I’ll keep it in mind.”

I smile at him. “Cool. I make no decisions without my Captain, but he’s very easy to bribe with food.”

“That is not inspiring for the kind of person you’d want to ask for allyship with,” Law deadpans.

“We make pretty decent distractions, to be fair,” I say offhandedly. “We’re loud and we’re strong, it’s a specific kind of application for a specific kind of situation.”

Law rolls his eyes. “I think I’ve spent too much time around you,” he mutters.

I shrug. “Eh. My weirdness will rub off on you after a while. Like the gay ass aura.”

“I think it’s time to get as far away from you as possible now,” he decides, getting to his feet. “I’m not sleeping anywhere near *this* or Eustass-ya’s psychotic ass, so I need to get fucking moving.”

“Yeah, fair,” I concede, pushing to my feet as well, only struggling a little when my knees kinda lock up after sitting for so long. Fucken myolopa or whatever the fuck Chopper said. Law eyes me weirdly and I give him a challenging look. “I’m halfway to being crippled, cut me some slack.”

“I noticed, with all the bandages and compression sleeves,” he says dryly. I stick my tongue out at him. He flips me off.

“Ayo Kid!” I holler over to where he seems to be sulking beside Killer, relocated to the long table with Luffy glaring at him and pouting. He looks over at me with something between a sneer and a grimace. “We’re kicking you off! Get the fuck out of here!”

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO—” he starts screaming before Killer stands up.

“Thank you for the heads up, Ed. I believe it’s time to leave regardless,” he announces.

“This guy is great, why does he have to come as a package deal with Shouty McFucklord,” I grumble quietly.

Law bleats out this really embarrassing laugh and I give him a shit eating grin. “Shut up. You heard nothing,” he says quickly, shoving a hand in my face and walking away.

I cackle and follow after him, waving Luffy over as I go. Luffy beams at the gesture, and slingshots himself off the table. “Oh shit no wait—”

Yeah so he bowls me over, which in turn has us accidentally tackling Law to the ground. A lot of threats of violence follow, with incredibly graphic descriptions of what he’ll leave our corpses looking like, while we just keep apologizing and looking like kicked puppies.

I don’t even notice when we reach the harbour area, not until Law stops berating us and just heaves an annoyed sigh. “You’re irritating. And exhausting to be around,” he hisses.

“Yeah but you like us,” I say smugly. “I can tell. We got to you.”

“Not in the slightest,” he refutes.

“You’re *all* fuckin’ annoying,” Kid complains behind us. We all turn and he scowls.

I completely ignore him to smile at Killer. “It was nice having you, thanks for coming!” I say, reaching out for a handshake.

Killer takes it and gives me a firm shake. “Yeah, thanks for having us. I apologize for… yeah.”

“Ah. Um. Yeah, I — uh, I apologize too. I really shouldn’t have lost my temper earlier, that’s pretty embarrassing for a host,” I laugh sheepishly. My face suddenly swivels toward Kid. I blink, confused at the action and the evil grin all up in his shit. “What the fuck?”

“Oh I knew I felt something. I *knew it!* You've got fucking metal in your mouth!” he announces proudly.

I slap a hand over my mouth with a bewildered look. “Did — Did you just fucking control my goddamn *permanent braces?!”*

Kid throws his head back and cackles. “Oh that’s rich! That’s so fucking perfect!”

“Hey! I didn’t suffer through years upon years of orthodontia for you to fuck with a tiny piece of metal fucking *welded to my teeth* to keep them straight! I NEED AT LEAST ONE THING ABOUT ME TO STAY STRAIGHT! LOOK HOW NICE MY SMILE IS!” I rage, bearing my teeth in a smile that is not a smile or nice because I’m fucking mad.

No, I'm not insecure about my teeth. Not at all. No I don’t constantly think about how unaligned they must be because when I got yote into this world I didn’t have my FUCKING RETAINER ON ME. I’M NOT MAD IT BROKE MY PERFECT STREAK OF USING IT. I’M NOT.

I huff a loud sound as Kid just howls laughter, literally having to take a second to walk out my anger and returning when I’m slightly more calm. “Ok. That was rude,” I say sternly.

“I’m sorry. He’s sorry,” Killer says, a hand tight on Kid’s upper arm.

“‘Course I am,” Kid drawls. “But hey, you never know when being able to move the mouth of someone like you will be… advantageous.”

Then he gives me this roguish half-feral smile and I just have to stare for a second. Then I blink rapidly and shake my head.

“Nope, I'm not allowed to sleep with you,” I say loudly, more to remind myself than him.

The smile drops off his face and is replaced by a look of utter bewilderment and indignation. “WHAT IS *WRONG WITH YOU—”*

“Thank you for having us, bye!” Killer interupts, herding Kid up the gangplant and motioning the crew to get them the fuck out of there.

I ignore them preparing for departure to turn back to the other two boys. Luffy is just kinda staring with a sweet smile, rocking back and forth on his heels, while Law watches with morbid fascination, his labret twisting idly from where I assume he’s playing with it with his tongue.

I blink a couple times. “Oh!” I suddenly shout. Both boys jump. “That reminds me! Stay right there, I’ll be right back! Don’t move a muscle!” I demand, pointing back at Law as I go sprinting for our ship.

I trip on the stairs and end up just scrambling up them on my hands and knees like you damn well know you do when you’re home alone, bursting into the ladies cabin (which we should totally rename and I’m surprised it’s taken me this long to think of that) and scaring Nami half to death.

“Oh my god!” she yells. “You scared the shit out of me! Are you done partying?”

“When did you leave the party?” I ask confusedly, not stopping or slowing down in my quest and digging around through my bag.

“A while ago, I wanted to get an early start tomorrow so I could check over some maps and maybe see about our course moving forward,” she explains, watching me with a puzzled expression. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Gift giving!” I respond, finding what I’m looking for and jumping up. “I’ll be back in a bit, we’re just wrapping up!” Then I’m back out the door and sprinting back to the boys. I skid to a stop in front of them, hands on my knees and wheezing. “Holy shit, that was such a bad idea,” I squeeze out. “Oh my god, never let me run like that ever in my life again.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Law groans.

I straighten up and give him a bright beaming smile, holding out my prize. “For you!” I chirp.

He slowly reaches out and slowly takes the labret bar with the heart shaped stud I’ve been carrying since our adventure on Skypiea. “What… why do you even have this?” he asks slowly in pure confusion.

“I found a shitton of jewelry when we were on a sky island, I pawned a bunch of it but I knew there was a reason I kept that one around!” I say proudly. “That thing’s gotta be old as *balls,* but it’s in great condition!”

Law just stares at me with an indecipherable expression. “Are… are you selling me this?”

I give him a weird look. “No? It’s a gift you dumbass, you don’t give me anything in return for it,” I explain with exaggerated words. “I know I said earlier you don’t look like you get gifts, so it’s important you understand how they work.”

“How do you not eat that thing when it’s in your mouth?” Luffy asks curiously.

“It’s attached to the outside of his face,” I respond.

“Oh,” Luffy mumbles with a frown. “I’d probably still find a way to eat it.”

“Probably,” I agree. “Can you even get piercings? Being rubber and all that. I guess you do take piercing and slashing damage…” I muse. “We should totally pierce your ears. Even just

one, it would be super fun."

"Yeah sure, why not," Luffy agrees easily.

"I am leaving now," Law says, slightly louder than he has to. He has his face turned away already, and the rest of him follows.

Shachi, Penguin and Bepo are all up on the deck of the Tang watching our exchange. "You guys are so weird," Penguin says, but it sounds like a compliment.

"You really are so great," Shachi adds with a shit eating grin.

"I'm so sorry," Bepo mumbles, face in his hands.

Law tosses his nodachi up and Bepo catches it effortlessly. He scrambles up the rails like he's trying to outrun us. We just kinda watch him. He stands on the top of the Polar Tang with his back to us for a moment, shoulders moving up and down with his breath.

Me and Luffy exchange a look.

"Thank you," Law says. It's sudden and his voice is tight, and he stubbornly refuses to turn to us.

I give him another sincere smile anyway. "Yeah, no problem. We'll see you around, Trafalgar Law," I say with a light laugh.

"Bye Trafalguy!" Luffy adds, vigorously waving his hands.

Shachi and Penguin both burst out laughing. Law’s shoulders hitch to his ears. “That’s not my name!” he squawks, stalking into the belly of his submarine.

I lean on Luffy with another laugh, an arm around his waist as a yawn breaks up the sound. “God, I gotta go to bed,” I murmur.

“Let’s go to bed, then,” Luffy agrees easily.

“Ok,” I mumble.

“Ok,” he repeats.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah yeah, Law's my favourite and I am very clearly biased with him. Listen if I wanna give the fucker an entire chapter for himself I can do as I damn well please leave me ALONE—

Ed's love language with specifically Law is gift giving simply because I find it fucking hilarious to have them just *give shit* to the guy who doesn't think anything in life comes for free.

Also I'm a gold-eyed Law truther, the silver in the anime is very nice ok I like that too but please. Please gold-eyed manga Law is something else entirely. I'm allowed to have my biases.

Oh and this is the part where I admit I actually really like Kid. He is a bastard man but he is a *very special* bastard man.

Killer and Luffy watching their spouses flirt like aggressive chickens: at least they’re having fun

Chapter 104: Chapter One Hundred and Four: By Your Hand Is The Only End I Foresee

Chapter Summary

By Your Hand - Los Campesinos!

I nearly trip over my bag when I get to my feet — fuck whoever left that there (it was totally me last night, wasn't it), shove just fucking whatever into my pockets (I definitely won't need half this shit), then nearly trip again going out the door.

Chapter Notes

I'm going to go see Wicked this week with my mom so everyone start praying for me being able to make it through nearly 3 hours without yapping. Because I Do Not think I can do that. I am going to try my best because Live Theatre People™ will skin me alive if I start acting up but please... I never learned how to shut the fuck up.....

Y'all this is a friendly reminder we're now in Sabaody proper and that means all the super lovely shit that comes with it; so there's talks and descriptions of slavery, dehumanization, fantastical racism, and plenty of violence ahead. Please take care of yourselves, and each other when you can.

This bad boy is 5k because I could not restrain myself. Oh and fun fact the last two chapters of this arc are both over 5k. And I cried writing both. So. Uh. I mean if you wanna know how well that went just look at this.

ANYWAY guys enjoy the chapter!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm roused from a weird dream about Johnny Yong Bosh — who was British for some reason? — trying to get me to fill out a scantron while yelling about the first question and how it was the worst option or something. Then a giant smoked fish tried to eat us both.

…Man at least it wasn't another bullshit dream about gothic architecture.

Anyway when I come to I'm the only one in the room, I'm halfway off the fucking bed, and based on the light I can see through the windows it looks like it's already early afternoon. I'm sore as FUCK, and there's a headache flirting with my spinal chord and threatening to have some very loud intercourse. Or something. I dunno, I hurt too much to make a good metaphor.

It takes a fucking lifetime for me to get upright in bed even before I can swing my legs over the side and try and get ready for the day. I don't even bother with a new outfit either, I just stick to what I had yesterday. If it ain't broke, or soaked in sweat or sea water or ripped into a million pieces, don't fix it. I don't bother buttoning my shirt up this time, though. I don't think my fingers would agree long enough to manage it.

I nearly trip over my bag when I get to my feet — fuck whoever left that there (it was totally me last night, wasn't it), shove just fucking whatever into my pockets (I definitely won't need half this shit), then nearly trip again going out the door.

I'm standing at the top of the stairs genuinely considering the ramifications of asking Sanji to carry me around and the type of evil doctor punishments Chopper will force me into for pushing myself and having to deal with the consequences.

"Ed! You're up!" Luffy cheers from the deck, making my choice for me when he sprints up the stairs and scoops me up before sprinting back down and shoving me into one of the chairs placed around the table that's been set up on the lawn.

"Oh ok," I deadpan, just letting that happen.

Everyone else is also there, and Camie smiles from beside me while flattening a map on the table. Sanji places a cup of tea in front of me and grins when I reach up to pat his cheek in thanks.

"So, what's the situation?" I ask, taking a sip of my tea.

"We're en route to the archipelago now, should be in view any minute actually, Pappag was just explaining our options and such," Nami explains, leaned up against the mast beside

Robin and cradling tea of her own.

"Ah," I sigh. "So where were we? I'm assuming the Red Line and the whole hopping over it thing being non applicable has been covered, so… are we at explaining the ship coating now?" I ask.

"Yeah…" Pappag says dejectedly, looking crushed by not being able to explain it himself.

"Wait, 'coated?' Coating the ship in what? And what does coating it have to do with us apparently crossing the ocean floor?" Usopp asks.

"It'll make a lot more sense when you see Sabaody itself, and I'm sure an actual ship coater would be able to explain the process much better than I could," I hum. "That reminds me; Nams I don't know if you were worried about it or not, but the archipelago won't fuck with the Log Pose so our course is secure."

"Oh?" Nami vocalizes, tilting her head and squinting at her Pose. "Why's that?"

"Woah!" Luffy suddenly gasps.

We all look up and see what he saw and all make sounds of awe in turn. Sabaody is nothing short of fucking *awesome,* huge mangrove trees and bubbles and the fucking amusement park making an incredible picture.

"How the hell are those things just going and going?" Usopp gapes. "Are the soap bubbles coming from the island?!"

"Who's blowing them all..?" Luffy questions.

"They do come from the island," Camie confirms.

“Alright that explains *nothing,”* Usopp deadpans.

“Does that explain the Pose not resetting?” Robin asks, brow furrowed. “Is… is it not really an island?”

“The Sabaody Archipelago is actually a mass of trees, the Yarukiman mangroves! The biggest in the world!” Hachi explains proudly. “There’s 79 trees in total, each making up an island of the archipelago with different towns or constructions.”

“Woah,” Luffy awes, staring up at the bubbles with a wide open mouth as we get closer.

“Grove 44 is the closest, and it’s the civilian entrance. We should head further in,” Hachi instructs.

“Before we make landfall, we should go over some ground rules,” I interject as we sail through the waters surrounding the mangrove roots.

“We need rules?” Luffy whines.

“Absolutely we do,” I say firmly. The hard edge in my voice was everyone quickly turning their full attention to me.

“Why are they so necessary? And uh, Ed, why do you seem so nervous?” Nami asks, starting to look fairly nervous herself.

“This place is a fucking nightmare disguised in cotton candy, and things could go really bad really fast if we’re not careful,” I say with a harsh sigh. “There’s a lot of really shitty things in real close proximity with this place that makes it dangerous as fuck.”

“The cotton candy is evil?” Chopper asks in complete horror.

“M — Maybe we just skip the archipelago, let’s just crawl over the Red Line!” Usopp yelps, sweating profusely.

“No way, we are *not* leaving this ship behind!” Franky protests.

“What exactly should we expect and look out for?” Robin asks calmly.

“First off; our proximity to Marie Jois and Marineford. That means tight ass Marine security and the real risk of high ranking Marines being present or called to the island. With that comes another huge problem; the Celestial Dragons,” I say gravely. Hachi, Camie and Pappag all shiver involuntarily.

“Who?” Luffy asks.

“The people who live in the Holy Land of Marie Jois,” Robin clarifies.

“They suck. They suckity-suck-suck- *suck,”* I state. “Most worthless hunks of shit on the planet and unfortunately, they’re higher than royalty. You’re gonna see those fucks commit some heinous acts, there’s really no avoiding it, but if you attack them or disrespect them at all it’s a force all but amounting to a fucking Buster Call down on our heads.”

Robin sucks in a sharp breath, her and everyone else listening. “They would do that..?” Nami whimpers out.

“Without hesitation,” I say mercilessly. “The biggest reason they’ll be down here is the last thing I need you to be painfully aware of. Sabaody is the must-hit spot before the New World, but it’s also the world’s biggest and most rampant slavery hub.”

And yet again, there's harsh gasps torn from my crew. "But — but the World Government outlawed slavery! Surely it wouldn't be happening so close to their headquarters?!" Sanji bargains.

I scoff. "Yeah, sure. Consider this; the Marines have to listen to the Celestial Dragons, and they *looooove* to keep slaves. One way or another, this place has the most established slave industry you'll find anywhere, and they're fucking good at it."

"That's disgusting," Zoro mutters.

"No shit," I murmur bitterly before looking over to our guides. "Speaking of, though, you're planning on going onto the archipelago with us, yeah?"

Camie hesitantly nods. "It's my dream to ride the ferris wheel…" she whispers dejectedly, staring off at roots as we pass them.

"But you won't be," Pappag says firmly.

"I know," she mumbles.

"You're going to be alright and able to keep yourself safe?" I press.

"Yeah, we'll be careful. Camie especially," Hachi confirms.

"Why?" Nami asks slowly, face pinched in apprehension.

"Like your detective friend said, slavery is huge on the archipelago. And there's nothing the slave industry loves more than a mermaid," Pappag says tightly. Camie curls in on herself and Hachi puts a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“She’ll absolutely be at the most risk,” I confirm. “But I’ll stick with you the whole time, I promise. No one is getting you without going through me first,” I say, giving her a determined grin and holding my hand out for a fist bump.

Camie gives me a grateful, if a little wobbly, smile and returns the bump.

“It’s important to note that any of us could still be at risk, however,” I continue. “Keep your guard up the whole time. And uh…” I kinda trail off.

“And uh?” Franky prompts.

I heave a sigh and shake out my jittery hands. “Imma keep it so real with you guys, slavery is in my top five— nay, top *two* biggest fears, right up there with all of you dying,” I say with a nervous laugh. “So, uh, let’s all proceed with the utmost caution, and if we ever come to a point where it — for one reason or another — looks like that is… an outcome for me, or we get absolutely fucked over to the point where it’s headed that direction, just fucking kill me. I mean it, kill me. I’d rather die than live through that, I don’t care how much of a coward it makes me.”

My crew blink at the request for a second before there’s an influx of protests and shouts that mesh together until I can’t make a damn thing out. Then Luffy is right in my face. “Ed, that's super big dumb, we’d just come and save you!” he states, brow furrowed in concern.

“I mean as a super last case scenario!” I yelp, waving my hands. “I don’t mean shoot me in the head if I get cuffed, I mean put me out of my misery if I’m getting hauled away and there’s no chance of escape!”

“Ed that’s a very extreme stance to take,” Brook says with no small amount of apprehension and worry in his voice.

“I don’t think I like that being an option on the table at all,” Nami adds with distress.

“We’d come and rescue you no matter what, it’s never going to come to that,” Sanji states, fingers twirling agitatedly through his hair.

“Good god, sorry for bringing it up!” I mumble into my cup, cheeks hot with the warm feeling of my crew’s support, but brows furrowing at the very upset reaction.

Robin and Zoro share an unsettled look and Camie, much like Hachi had done with her, places a comforting hand on my knee.

“Moving swiftly along,” I change the subject loudly, ignoring the glances from my crew that say they know exactly what I’m doing. “Ship coater. We need a ship coater, y’all know a ship coater?”

“I know one around here who I’d trust with my life,” Hachi answers. “I’ll take you there no problem. Let’s dock here at Grove 41.”

“Remember that number!” Pappag instructs as we all get to our feet, ready for departure. “All the islands are connected by bridges, so as long as you keep the number in mind you won’t get lost.”

“Tell that to Zoro,” I snicker.

“Shut up. I don’t get lost,” Zoro immediately refutes.

“Oh my sincerest apologies, I forgot I was speaking with Roronoa ‘My Heart’s My Compass’ Zoro, who arrives precisely *where* he means to precisely *when* he means to,” I drawl sarcastically, giving him a big teasing grin.

I don’t know if it’s more fitting to call him a wizard or a Queen of Genovia. I mean both are hilarious.

“You’re the worst,” he says flatly, picking me up like luggage and disembarking the ship with me under his arm. I just let that happen because be so for fucking real, I am *not* making it through today if I have to walk the entire goddamn time.

“13,000 berri you’ll forget what Grove we’re parked in or go to the wrong one,” I sing-song, poking him in the stomach.

“You’re on, stupidhead. I’m great with numbers,” he agrees immediately, turning to look at the Grove number. A bubble just so happens to be passing over half of it at that exact moment, and I just let that misunderstanding happen, for profit.

“The bubbles are coming out of the ground!” Luffy marvels, poking at it and his eyes lighting up when it doesn’t burst. Naturally, he jumps on top of the damn thing to test his theory. “You can stand on these!” he announces proudly.

“The roots of the Yarukiman mangroves secrete a special kind of resin,” Pappag explains.

Robin bends down and runs a finger through the resin and makes a face. “...Oh dear, it’s quite sticky,” she mumbles, wiping her hand on Usopp’s shorts.

“Hey!” Usopp shrieks.

Luffy, like the little fucking maniac he is, starts jumping up the resin bubbles like it’s some kind of obstacle course. “I can see the theme park from here!” he hollers down. “I wanna ride the ferris wheel, let’s go!”

Camie sighs dejectedly and I reach out as far as I can from under Zoro’s arm to just barely poke her in the elbow, giving her a reassuring smile when she looks over.

“Before we continue, I’d like you to promise me something,” Hachi pipes up. Luffy falls out of the sky behind him and jumps to his feet, dusting himself off before trotting to stand beside Zoro and I. “Like Ed said, we’re bound to run into Celestial Dragons. But no matter

what happens, even if they kill someone right in front of you, just pretend you didn't see anything!"

_____

I'm paying absolutely no attention to the things being said around me as we walk through Sabaody. I'm pretty sure Hachi is explaining more about the Celestial Dragons or whatever, but I'm devoting basically all of my mental energy to being painfully aware of every single person in our vicinity.

Both Camie and Hachi had donned their human disguises, and by that I mean Camie put on a long skirt and Hachi stuffed all his arms under a big jacket, then taped over the Sun Pirates emblem on his forehead. If it works it works..?

I mean, Hachi's face is still in the shape of Hachi's face, which I guess we're all just ignoring. And Camie… I don't even know how to describe it. From a distance she looks totally human, even the skirt and shoes do their job in giving the illusion of legs, but up close there's something about her face that's just… a step left of *off*.

There's at least four guys who have taken second looks at us, which could just be because we are a very attractive group of people (or because Brook is a whole fucking skeleton and Chopper is a whole fucking reindeer thing), but I'm really not gonna chance it.

I squint over at some dude who had glanced in our direction before leaning to whisper something to another guy he's standing with. When he looks back in our direction he freezes, making direct eye contact with me.

I glance down to the bounty poster in his pal's hand, I can't tell who's, then back to his frozen face. I very slowly raise my hand and drag my thumb across my neck as he gulps. Then I turn slightly so he can see my guns on my hip and point to him, then just as slowly as before mime cocking a gun, then violently mime blowing my brains out. Just to drive the point home, I keep my head tilted at the angle I jerked it to and give him a wide creeping smile without letting it touch my eyes in the slightest and lazily wag my fingers at him in a wave.

So that guy turns white in the face and all but tackles his friend into whatever alley they crawled out of while vigorously shaking his head.

Huge win. Go me.

“Ed, I’m inside a bubble!” Luffy cackles, drawing my attention back to him.

“Why the fuck are you inside a bubble?” I groan, massaging my temples. That headache I felt tryna seduce my spine earlier is making progress with the madame that is my brain stem.

“Have a seat, Ed. You should get a break from being on your feet,” Robin hums, pushing me onto the… man what the fuck even is this. It’s like a… bubble donut with a backrest in the middle?

“You know what? I’m just not gonna ask,” I grumble, tucking my feet up under me and resting my head on my arms.

My friends go back to chatting as we resume moving, this time much faster on the bubble vehicles. I eye all the people we pass, taking in strange outfits and all kinds of weapons. There’s a shitton of swordsmen just out and about, but we don’t get as many side eyes as before as we move faster through the archipelago.

“Ed! Hey Ed, can you tell me about Fishman Island? I wanna go so baaaaaad,” Luffy moans, sticking his head out of his bubble car thingy to make faces at me.

I laugh at his antics. “How about we leave some mystery for once, hm?”

“Mmmmmm, yeah ok. Yeah, I don’t want spoilers anyway,” he decides with a sunny smile.

“You’re gonna wanna make sure you meet the mermaid princess, she’s a real stunner! And I’m a starfish, so you know I’m telling the truth,” Pappag pipes up. “I’m in cahoots with her,

so I'll sort it out for ya."

"Pappag, you're a gem," I laugh.

"I look forward to that, I do truly only have eyes for the beautiful," Brook says wistfully. "Although, being a skeleton, I don't have any! Yohohoho!"

"Oooooh, Ed they have food!" Luffy gasps, all of us ignoring Brook as we stop beside a stand called Antonio's Graman. After a single sweep of his selection reveals he has no smoked fish — which I'm STILL fucking craving, because I cursed myself with that comment yesterday so bad I DREAMT ABOUT IT — I go back to ignoring it.

I keep keeping an eye out as the boys act like little dumb dumbs and buy a bunch of stupid shit from the guy running the stand. Fucking hell, this place is making me paranoid. I greatly dislike everything about this. Nami and Robin both go off for shopping at some point and I offhandedly wave them off while scanning through the crowd.

"Ed, we're racing!" Luffy announces, yoinking me into his bubble car thing. "You're with me! Hang on!"

"Wait what—"

Yeah so surprisingly enough racing in a fucking *bubble car* is significantly less fun and significantly more vomit inducing than you'd think.

"Hey, what's going on up there?" Luffy suddenly says. I jerk my head up as we slow to a halt, disrupted by the sight of a man in the middle of the road.

"Come on! Please, somebody help me! Anybody! Come on, an axe or a saw!" the man yells, voice hoarse and raw. He has one hand around the neck of a screaming woman and the other trying to dig under the metal collar encircling his throat. "I don't care what it is, just someone

get me out of this thing! Just destroy it, I won't hurt anyone anymore! I've given up on the New World already, ok?!"

"Let me go, please, I don't wanna die!" the woman sobs, scrambling at his hand.

"I have a wife and kid waiting back home for me! Please, I just wanna go home!" the guy wails, dropping the woman in a heap on the ground. "Just help me! My kid was just a baby when I left! He doesn't even know his fathers face yet!"

"Don't get involved! He's probably a pirate who got caught by kidnappers and sold into slavery," Hachi says, low but with urgency. "His owner probably brought him to this place and he made a run for it! He should know it's useless!"

I slip out of the bubble as Camie covers her ears, shoulders shaking violently as she turns away. I watch the man with a horrified gaze that won't slip, no matter how much I want to tear my eyes away from the scene.

The guy is running now, the ring making ominous beeping sounds as he desperately claws at it, tears building in his eyes. "This ring… If I could just get this ring off me..!"

The collar explodes.

The sound is deafening through the street, followed immediately by peoples screams as he collapses to the ground in a smoking heap. Luffy makes a choked out noise in the bubble behind me and Camie smothers a whimper in her hands.

"Slaves are always restrained by chains around their necks… if they break the chains and try to escape, the collars are rigged to explode!" Hachi explains in a hiss.

"That's horrible..!" Luffy gasps out.

Then the people's screaming gets louder as they realize where the explosion came from. "It's a runaway slave! Get away from him! Don't go near him!" someone shouts as people begin running the opposite direction or dropping to their knees and ducking their heads.

I reach up into the bubble and start insistently tugging Luffy. "Out out out!" I hiss, wide eyes scanning the direction the man had come from. He frowns but nods and complies as my friends are all screaming around me.

A dog is what appears where I'm looking first. I couldn't tell you what kind of breed if I wanted to, it's tall and lithe but with the face of a pug encased by the astronaut-esque helmet it's wearing.

"Is that one of those Dragons..?" Luffy mumbles.

"Get down on your knees, and don't meet their eyes no matter what!" Hachi instructs frantically. "And don't touch the dog, the Celestial Dragons are right behind it!"

I immediately drop to my knees and yank Luffy down with me, hands fisted on the back of his shirt. "Luffy, please, no matter what they do don't make a scene," I plead in a whisper. He looks back at me with an aching mix of confusion and horror.

The dog lifts its leg and starts taking a piss on the smoking body of the man, when a woman's voice pierces through the air, imperial and… fucking British. "Come now… don't be vulgar, Saru!"

"That's them..?" Luffy mutters lowly. I clench my shaking fingers tight in the fabric of his shirt as the procession arrives.

At the front is Saint Rosward, dressed up in those stupid fucking white robes with a fishbowl helmet on his head, and right behind him is Saint Shalria in the same attire. They both have those dumb matching gravity defying hairstyles, with Rosward sporting a beard and Shalria having a silk mask hanging off her nose bridge. Immediately visible behind them is Jean Bart, massive and with the thick chain connected to his collar anchored in Rosward's hand. There's also a guard accompanying them.

“Dear me, father. It seems another of our slaves has broken down,” Shalria enunciates with sharp eloquence. Yeesh, there’s no way she hasn’t had any work done, being the progeny of *that thing* and not having a face like a horse’s ass.

“Did you remember to give it its daily sedative?” Rosward drawls in that same high-crust accent.

“Of course I did, but it seems it has no effect on fools,” Shalria spits, walking ahead of her father to stand over the fallen, still smoldering man. “You shall simply have to buy a new one.”

“You truly are terrible with them,” Rosward sighs. “You’re decimating my Captain collection one by one.”

“It was useless to begin with,” she snarls, kicking her pointy boot into the man’s body. “A grown man, always crying about his family and carrying on and on. Nothing but a lowly. Human. Slave,” she hisses, punctuating each word with another sharp kick.

“He can’t even move right now…” Luffy grits out.

I impossibly tighten my hold on his shirt. “Luffy, please,” I breathe out near-silently.

“You make me want to vomit,” Shalria sneers, pulling a pistol and firing it into the limp man, making his blackened body jerk.

Luffy, predictably, lunges. I’m ready for him, latching around him in a hug from behind as Hachi slaps a hand over his mouth. “Luffy! *Please!”* I beg as quietly as I can, fingers digging into the skin of his chest.

“I think I should like a giant for my next slave,” Shalria says casually as they continue down the road, leaving the fallen Captain behind.

“I think you should start with a human child first,” Rosward suggests as they get further and further away.

“Ugh. You know how I detest the weak ones,” she scoffs.

As the Marines start swooping in to collect the body, Hachi ushers us all to our feet and away from the scene.

My eyes stay stuck on the burnt man’s body as my hands remain clenched on my Captain.

———

Hachi relocates us to one of the bridges between the mangrove islands, I couldn’t fucking tell you which, where we all sit in a row and try to collect ourselves.

“Would you like some tea? It’ll calm your nerves,” Brook offers Camie, voice low and soothing.

Camie shakes her head. “I feel sick after seeing that,” she chokes out.

“Ed? Would you care for some?” Brook calls to where I’m sitting further down the line, tucked into Luffy’s side and bracketed by Hachi.

“Yes please,” I murmur, wringing my fingers out. It’s a bit of a game of pass-it-down until the cup finds me, but when it does I take an immediate sip and ignore the burn it leaves trailing down my throat.

“You think that guy is gonna be alright?” Luffy asks, voice unnaturally flat. I press in closer to him.

“If he does survive, it’ll be in a cell for piracy,” Hachi mumbles.

“That guy could have totally beat that girl and the old man up,” Chopper mutters.

“Did you forget what your friend said already? Attacking a Celestial Dragon would call an Admiral here,” Pappag reminds, crossing his… are they arms? Do starfish have arms? “Not to mention a whole fleet of battleships.”

“Aokiji, Kizaru, or Akainu, either way we’d be cooked,” I huff, tucking my knees up and balancing my cup on them. “Wait Brook where the fuck did you get a teacup with your face on it?”

“Why are these shitheads worth so much protection anyways? Why do they get to act like this?” Chopper asks, voice dripping in frustration and bowling over my question.

“It’s because of their stupid fuckin’ bloodlines,” I answer, letting him. “The Celestial Dragons are descended from the 20 kingdoms that established the World Government. What do they call them? The Creators, or something. They’ve had this godly hot air blown up their asses their whole lives, so they think they just get to walk all over people. What kind of fuckfaced asshole actually believes themself so superior they can own another human being?”

“That’s fucking stupid,” Luffy grumbles.

“Agreed,” I sigh, letting Hachi take my cup before it falls as I adjust. “Do you guys understand my request now? I can’t — I *won’t* live like that, not if I have an out. And if I have any say in it, I’d rather they not get the satisfaction of killing me.”

“But that’s stupid too!” Luffy bursts out, tugging me even closer into his side with an arm around my shoulders. He keeps his glare directed straight out at the trees even as he speaks. “I’ll always be around to save you, and even if I’m not, don’t you want to go down fighting?”

“You want an honest answer?” I ask, following his example and keeping my eyes on the distance as I lean into him.

“Yes,” he says firmly.

“I’d rather it be you than anyone else,” I say truthfully.

Luffy’s fingers curl over my shoulder rigidly. “What?” he asks tightly. “Why?”

“I trust you to know when the line is. When I’m past saving or when I’m salvageable. I put my life in your care every single day, this isn’t really much different,” I mumble, brow furrowing.

“But that’s…” Luffy trails off, chin dipping down. “You said I wasn’t allowed to die without putting up a fight. Why is that not the same for you?” he asks petulantly.

“Luffy,” I murmur gently. “By your hand, or not at all. How’s that?”

He finally turns to look at me. I do the same. “Or not at all?” he parrots.

“Or not at all,” I repeat. “I won’t stand for anyone else putting an end to me.” I chuckle a little and shake my head. “Nope, no one but you will do.”

Luffy contemplates this for a moment before knocking his forehead into mine. “So… basically you’re not allowed to die unless I’m the one who makes it happen?”

I snort a little. “Yeah. Guess that makes me functionally immortal for the time being, if only in principle. Is that agreeable to you?”

Luffy’s lip twists up as he considers, then smooths out into a smile. “Fine. Don’t get too far out of my range then, ok?”

I smile back at him and hold up my pinkie. “Unquestionably.”

He laughs and hooks his pinkie in mine. “Consequentially and truly?” he asks, not stumbling over a single syllable.

I beam at him with every bit of brightness I have in me. “Consequentially and truly,” I confirm.

It’s like gravity bends inwards, like for a second we’re the very centre of the universe and the whole world is holding its breath for us. The water under the bridge we’re on is licking up the roots in loud crashing waves, punctuating the well of silence that seems to consume the vicinity.

“By your hand,” I start.

“Or not at all,” he finishes.

We both have the same idea at the same time, lifting our linked hands and pressing lips to our own thumbs like a sort of playground handshake. It’s a kind of pseudo kiss that feels more like sealing a contract, or renewing our vows.

…Man Ace is gonna be *so* fucking mad when he finds out he missed both the actually wedding *and* whatever this add on was.

“I feel like we’re intruding,” Chopper whispers so loudly it’s barely a whisper at all.

“Just let them have this,” Brook whispers back just as loudly.

Chapter End Notes

So about the last part. My finger slipped. Y’all I don’t know what happened I had no plan of doing that until it was happening istg these motherfucker's relationship POSSESSES ME and just writes itself however it fucking pleases. I was pretty much done with the chapter and was like hm maybe I’ll add some conversation here at the end, stuff another couple hundred words in to even it out around 4k, then suddenly BAM BITCH you’re writing a whole fucking VOW RENEWAL and CHANGING THE NAME OF THE CHAPTER TO FIT IT I don’t know what HAPPENED—

The question: how many callbacks to motifs and repeating phrases from their relationship can I possibly fit into this tiny little last part?
The answer: ALL OF THEM.
Like no shit go try and find all the callbacks in that bitch. There's shit from all over the fic in there.

Let’s here it for Chopper; the only Strawhat to witness both of The Idiots™ ceremonies. Bless that poor baby.

Chapter 105: Chapter One Hundred and Five: Lover, Please Prepare For My Absence

Chapter Summary

Absence - Rio Romeo

“Two Supernovas; a detective and a Captain, plus a skeleton, a reindeer and friends walk into a bar,” I start. “The Supernovas and the skeleton raid the fridge, and the bartender says…”

Chapter Notes

Guys this arc was made specifically to cause you pain and by god the rest of it is going hurt so for the love of all that is holy walk into this knowing that. It's going to be funny and there's gonna be goofs to the bitter fucking end but bad things WILL HAPPEN.

Nevermind that though SHAKKY IS IN THIS CHAPTER, REJOICE!!! I love that woman. Queen of my heart. Silvers Rayleigh you are one *lucky* son of a bitch.

WICKED WAS VERY GOOD THE LEADS VOCALS WERE GODLY AND I DIDN'T YAP FOR ALMOST 3 HOURS IT WAS THE LONGEST I'VE BEEN SILENT WHILE CONCIOUS IN FOREVER. Anyway.

I've been thinking about posting a chapter on Wednesday because I've got a pretty damn good buffer of them prewritten, still haven't decided so don't wait up for it but like. You may want to start praying for it with the way this badboy ends lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’ll admit it because I’m man enough to; getting to sit back with Camie, Hachi and Pappag and watch as the boys blow off steam by kicking in the teeth of the bounty hunting assholes who were following us is actually great.

I mean, I haven’t gotten to fight anything in fucking forever, and I’m itching to start using my guns for something other than loaned training material for Zoro (which really does work out well for me, since it means the dials are fully charged), but I guess the break is… nice.

I literally just get to chill on the donut bubble thingy and point out all the weirdos I've clocked as we slowly but surely make our way to our destination. I pay extra close attention as we move further inland into the lawless zones, tuning out my friend's chatter until we finally arrive at Grove 13.

"That's it up on that big root. It's been about ten years, I wonder if he's still running the shop," Hachi comments.

"Hey, is this coating mechanic guy a fishman too?" Luffy asks. "Well, I guess we'll see when we meet him."

"Me and Pappag haven't actually met him yet, but I've heard he's the best there is," Camie answers.

"Really?" Luffy hums, upside down in his bubble car and trying to pedal with his hands.

After a short drive up the long ass staircase, we finally come to a stop and disembark in front of the slightly overgrown building of Shakky's Rip-Off Bar.

"Uh, Hachi, it says right on the sign they're going to rip us off!" Pappag shrieks.

"This mechanic guy isn't going to beat us up and steal our money, right?" Chopper asks nervously, carrying Camie on his shoulders in his big form.

"Oh, not at all! They're good people," Hachi says happily as we all head for the door. "I've known this guy since I was a kid."

"You didn't say this place was a bar!" Luffy laughs, dragging me with him as he bounces behind Hachi.

“Looks like they’re still up and running,” Hachi cheers as he opens the door. “Rayleigh, Shakky, are you here?”

“Hey, welcome in. What can I get you?” Shakky herself greets, cigarette hanging out of her mouth and holding a brutalized guy up beside a pile of multiple other beat up dudes. Then her eyes widen in recognition. “Oh my, Hatchan! Is that really you? I haven’t seen you in ages!”

Hachi ducks his head with a bashful laugh. “I know. Sorry it’s been so long, Shakky.”

“How long has it been? Ten years? Make yourselves at home, this won’t take me a minute. Just collecting some money these boys don’t owe me,” she invites, shaking the collar of the groaning man she’s holding.

“Sure, take your time,” Hachi responds, going to sit without hesitation with Luffy and I right on his heels.

“Thanks, hun,” she chuckles. Getting to watch that lady beat the shit outta those guys, rob them, then toss them the fuck off the root is nothing short of fucking awesome, and I already adore her from the bottom of my heart.

Luffy and Brook immediately start raiding the fridge because they have no decorum, but Luffy pours me a glass of milk while I sit at the bar so I really don’t have anything to complain about.

“So you left the pirate life, Hatchan?” Shakky asks once she’s settled down in the booth with him and Camie.

“Yeah, a lot of stuff happened,” he responds.

“Well I’m proud of you. Your health comes first, after all,” she continues. “Gotta say, it’s pretty rare to find a mermaid above ground. So Camie, are you Hatchan’s girlfriend?”

“EEEH?!” Camie shrieks, her eyes bugging out and her tongue doing some absolutely insane wiggly shit in the air before she’s diving out of the booth and hiding her face in her hands. “I’m still too young to get married!” she cries, bright cherry red.

I choke on my milk as I start laughing.

“She’s from the takoyaki stand…” Hachi corrects.

“Oh, I see,” Shakky chuckles before turning to us at the bar. “Right, would you guys want anything to drink..?” She pauses when she sees the three of us have very much already helped ourselves.

“These beans are delicious!” Brook announces.

Pappag and Chopper both start shrieking when they notice what we’ve done. Well, what Brook and Luffy have done. I’m simply a bystander profiting from the crime.

“Two Supernovas; a detective and a Captain, plus a skeleton, a reindeer and friends walk into a bar,” I start. “The Supernovas and the skeleton raid the fridge, and the bartender says…”

Shakky raises an eyebrow with a smile, chuckling again. “What does the bartender say?”

“Dang, I was hoping you’d say something so I didn’t have to actually think of a joke,” I mumble, brow furrowing as I take a sip of my milk. “Gimme a second, I got this. Uhhhh… ‘I hope you have cash on you, because we don’t accept payments in starpower.’”

Shakky throws her head back and laughs. “For friends of Hatchan, E. D. Domino, that milk is on the house with no starpower *or* cash required,” she declares, then materializes a stick of cotton candy out of fucking nowhere and offers it to Chopper. “Here, this is for you.”

Chopper overcomes his horror at our manners to lunge for the treat, getting ready to shove the entire thing in his mouth before pausing with wide terrified eyes turn to me. “But… the cotton candy is evil, isn’t it..?”

“No, not this stuff. I promise this cotton candy isn’t evil,” I sooth, pushing down the urge to cackle at that.

“Hey lady, how’d you know Chopper likes cotton candy? And Ed’s name?” Luffy asks, still rooting through the fridge and just shoving random ingredients in his mouth.

“You’re Monkey D. Luffy, right? Everybody is talking about your crew, and I work to stay well informed,” Shakky snickers, ducking into the bar and leaning up against it. “Well, I didn’t know you had a skeleton on your crew. Or that skeletons could move and talk,” she concedes.

“Ah, please pardon my delayed introduction. I’m the dead and skeletonized Brook, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Brook introduces himself politely.

“The pleasure’s mine,” Shakky says with a coy smile. “Oh, you’ve got a little something there,” she hums, reaching out and plucking a stray bean off Brook’s face before popping it in her mouth.

“You are amazing,” Brook rattles out, his skull blowing open to release a cloud of steam.

I reach over to smack him before he can keep going. “Brook, no. Mrs. Shakky, please,” I say admonishingly.

Shakky just laughs and ushers Luffy over the bar and into the seat beside me before starting to prepare coffee for all of us. “Mrs? Oh honey please, just call me Shakky. I recently read an article about the Enies Lobby incident, how much of that is true? Did you really start a fight with the government?” she asks, switching tracks as she pours our drinks.

“Uuuuuugh, who cares, it’s such a long and boring story,” Luffy groans.

“Borning for *you,* I got the shit kicked out of me,” I complain, dumping the rest of my milk into the coffee.

“No boasting, huh? What a big shot!” she laughs. “One thing I’m curious about, are you related to Garp of the Marines?”

“Yeah, he’s my grandpa,” Luffy replies easily, trying to sip his coffee through a rolled up tongue.

“Thought so. You know, he used to chase me all over the sea,” Shakky chuckles, a nostalgic little smile playing on her lips.

“Hah? Why?” Luffy asks, giving up with the tongue thing and just drinking it like a normal person. Or as close to normal as he can get.

“Shakky used to be a pirate,” Hachi answers.

“It’s been forty years, I’ve washed my hands of it,” she dismisses playfully.

“Lady, how old *are* you?” Luffy asks, bewildered. I smack him on the back of the head with a pleasant smile, no words needed.

“These days I get my kicks watching rookies like you guys,” she snickers, reaching over the bar to give me an appreciative boop on the nose. I… alright so I’m feeling a lot more from that than I thought I would.

“Speaking of, Shakky,” Hachi starts.

“No need, save your breath,” Shaky interrupts with a raised hand, cigarette balanced between two fingers. “I know everything. You came by land to help Monkey and his crew get their ship coated, hm? So basically, you have a coating job for Rayleigh,” she infers.

“Yeah, that about sums it up,” Hachi admits.

“Waah, Ed she’s like you,” Luffy snickers, elbowing me. I just grin and flick the bottom of his hat.

“I hate to tell you, but he’s not here right now,” Shakky sighs, fond eyes tracking between Luffy and I.

“Whaaaaat? He’s not even here right now?” Luffy whines. “But we wanna go to Fishman Island!”

“He wouldn’t have left the archipelago, your best bet is to look for him in bars and gambling houses in the area,” she suggests.

“Eh, it’d be easier to just wait here for him,” Luffy groans.

“Sure, but he hasn’t been back for about six months,” she says casually.

“SIX MONTHS?!” my boys all shriek.

“He’s probably been shacking up with some girl he met at a bar, so I can’t say I’m worried. It’s just what ex-pirates do I suppose, they go exploring and they take their time in coming back,” she muses, head tilted to the side.

“The craftsman guy was a pirate too?” Luffy questions.

“Sure was,” Shakky confirms.

“That’s a problem, then. If he’s not here, then I suppose it does fall to us to find him,” Brook murmurs. “Do you have an approximation of where we should begin our search?”

Shakky hums, taking a slow drag of her cigarette. “If I had to guess, I’d say somewhere between Groves 1-29. He’s pretty notorious, so he’s not going to be hanging around anywhere the Marines are.” She pauses and tilts her head the other direction. “Though he’s also fond of Sabaody Park, so that’s a fair bet too.”

“The amusement park?” Luffy repeats, immediately perking up with a grin. “That’s where we’re looking first then!” he cheers, the boys and Camie joining in.

“Camie!” Pappag admonishes, but he’s overall ignored. I frown into my coffee.

“Wherever you go, you’d better be careful,” Shakky warns. “According to my information, you’ve got some infamous company out there. With your arrival, there are now 12 people with over 100 million berri bounties on the island.”

“You mean the other Supernovas?” Luffy asks.

Shakky blinks. “That’s right. Have you read the paper?”

“Nope,” Luffy denies. “I don’t read the news. No worries though, we’ve met them all already. It’s fine,” he says flippantly, waving his hand.

“You have?” Shakky questions, the hand holding her cigarette lowering.

“I organized a party. We’re at the very least cordial with most of them, I wouldn’t expect them to start any shit with us,” I explain simply, then make a face. “Except Kid. *Fuck* Kid.”

Shakky lets out a slightly startled laugh, her eyes creasing together in mirth. “My, Domino dear, you’re just full of surprises! You’ll have to tell me all about this party sometime, a story like that’s bound to be quite the interesting one.”

“You don’t think any of those guys would do anything to the craftsman guy, do you?” Luffy asks, directing the question at both Shakky and I.

I snort and Shakky snickers a little, flicking ash off the end of her cigarette into a nearby ashtray. “Oh he’ll be fine,” she dismisses. “He’s about 100 times stronger than you kids.”

There’s a moment of silence across the bar.

“...A hundred..?” Chopper squeaks.

Shakky just laughs.

_____

Shakky has us up and headed for the exit of the bar, but before we can move on from here I make a split second decision I’ve been putting off for entirely too long.

Luffy gets up from his seat to bound at the door, but I delicately grab his wrist before he can get too far. “Luffy, can we… talk?” I ask hesitantly.

Everyone pauses in place. The corner of Luffy’s mouth ticks down, eyes darting across my face and not knowing how to feel about what he finds there. “Yeah, of course,” he complies anyway.

I turn back to Shakky, who’s slowly straightening after ducking back under the bar. “Sorry, this is pretty rude of me to ask, but could we commandeer your bar for a minute?”

She takes her time in observing us, eyes tracking across Luffy's face then mine, seeming to clock onto every minute tick and detail. Her eyes linger on Luffy's chest and my left hand, and her expression smooths into something understanding and warm. "Yeah, go right ahead. We'll just wait outside then, hm?"

I say my thanks and the rest of our friends and companions walk out the door, varying expressions and looks tossed back at us until Shakky is closing the door behind her.

With it just being me and my Captain left in the room, I'm suddenly at a loss for what to say. My mouth opens and closes a couple times, grasping for words it can't seem to find.

"Ed? What is it?" Luffy prompts, shifting to be standing eye to eye with me and tilting his head.

"We aren't ready for the New World," I blurt. Luffy blinks twice before he goes very still. "We… We aren't strong enough yet, not by a long shot. The stuff out there would chew us up and spit us out, and — and we need significantly more training before we're even remotely prepared to face it," I rush out.

The silence of the bar is deafening and I take a deep breath, arms crossing tightly over my chest as I have to avert my eyes from the pressure of Luffy's expression.

"We need more time to — to train, and — and I wanted to bring this up earlier but I was afraid you wouldn't like what I said. I… I'm *still* afraid you're not liking what I'm saying," I admit, much quieter than when I started.

Luffy is quiet for a long long moment, I hold my breath as the weight of his gaze presses in on me. "Ed, I… *don't* like this," he says slowly. I let go of the breath I was holding, only for it to get trapped right back in my throat. "You… how long have you thought that?"

"A while," I manage to choke out. My eyes dart up quickly, just enough to catch the way his expression twists before I make myself look away again.

“I told you I’d always hear you out,” he reminds me, tone painfully hard to decipher.

“I know.”

“You know how I feel about you bottling things up.”

“I know.”

“But there’s still more things you can tell me but aren’t,” he says, and it doesn’t sound like an accusation at all but it still feels like one. I nod in jerky motions. “You don’t just mean another week or so on Sabaody to train,” he says slowly.

I nod again. “The type of training we need, it — it’s not the kind of thing we can do… all together like this,” I push out of my strangled throat.

I feel more than hear the rush of air as Luffy sucks in a sharp breath. My eyes remain averted even as his footsteps approach closer and his hand reaches out to my shoulder, clenching in the fabric of my shirt and still not saying anything.

“I’ll always follow your lead,” I say quietly. “So… so think it over for yourself, and whatever you decide…” I hesitate, but lift my gaze off the floor to meet Luffy’s eyes. His expression is pinched, eyebrows drawn together and mouth tight. “Whatever you decide, I’ll follow without question. If you say fuck it, dropping in the deep end will teach us to swim, I’m by your side. If you say we need more time, I’ll stand by your decision. No matter what you pick, I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

There’s another long silence punctuated by nothing other than us both breathing. Luffy’s other hand reaches up to grab my other shoulder, the fabric of my shirt pulling taught over my back before his hold relaxes, head dipping down until the brim of his hat is obscuring his expression.

“I told you I trusted your judgment,” Luffy finally breaks the silence. “I said I’d always at least hear you out. So I’ll think about what you said.”

I reach up to take both his hands, running my thumbs across the backs. “That’s all I ask. Your responsibility as Captain is to consider the wellbeing of your crew, and my responsibility as First Mate is to support you anyway I can. We’re in your hands, Monkey D. Luffy, hold us well.”

Luffy breathes in a heavy breath, then lets it out. He squeezes my hands once, then lets them drop. “Let’s go find the coating guy,” he eventually settles on saying, turning his back to me and heading for the door.

I follow unhesitatingly in his wake, two steps behind him.

———

Luffy gets the bounce back in his step before a single person even questions what we were talking about. He jumps in his bubble car thing with a laugh and a cheer for the amusement park. I apologize to Shakky for the inconvenience, she tells us not to cause too big of a fuss, and then we’re off.

The only indication the conversation even happened is the ever present pit in my stomach, the subtle string of tension running through Luffy’s shoulders no one but me seems to notice, and a simple question from Chopper that is waved off with a laugh and a promise it wasn’t that important.

“Wooooah! Look at it!” Luffy awes as we reach the park, Camie, Chopper and Brook right behind him with stars in their eyes. “It looks so fun!”

“Focus! Remember why we’re here!” Pappag demands.

“This is where the lady said to look for him!” Luffy argues, grinning up at the place and bouncing on his feet like it’ll run away if he doesn’t get inside immediately.

“Only if he’s not in the lawless area!” Pappag shrieks.

“Look at the ferris wheel! I’ve never seen it from this close before!” Camie squeals, tugging on my arm and making an expression that does not look like it should be physically possible.

“Alright! Let’s go have fun!” Luffy hollers, pumping his arms. Everyone cheers along with him.

“You aren’t ever *trying* to find him!” Pappag accuses. Camie starts cheering louder. “Camie you’re forbidden to go inside! ABSOLUTELY *NOT—”*

_____

We all end up on a roller coaster against Pappag’s best wishes. And mine, to be honest. I think I’d rather eat a boiled croc than be on this thing, clinging to whoever I can as I scream my goddamn head off.

“I REALLY HATE ROLLER COASTERS!” I sob, tears streaking back into my hair from how fast we’re moving.

_____

I spend five minutes just heaving into a trash can.

“Ed, why did you get on the ride if you knew you wouldn’t like it?” Chopper asks disparagingly, him and Camie work together to keep my bangs out of the way. Brook is on the ground beside me, heaving breath in and trying to wheeze out a skeleton joke and failing.

“Shaddup,” I groan. “I said I’d stick with Camie the whole time, and Camie wanted to ride it so — *oh dear god wait—”*

Yeah I puke in the trash can again.

_____

The carousel goes better. I like the carousel.

Brook sits this one out, watching and waving from a bench while Luffy pretends to race his thing against Hachi and Chopper’s while me and Camie laugh from the one in front of him.

It’s a good time.

_____

“I want you to know I think you’re evil for this one,” I whimper, clutching the safety rail of the drop tower thing in an iron grip.

“What makes you say that, Ed? These slower rides are much more fun,” Brook says calmly in the seat beside mine.

I turn to him in tears as we stop at the very top of the tower. “Brook you poor stupid son of a biTCH OH MY GOD—”

I think Brook’s soul leaves his body on the way down.

_____

The teacups are great right up until it becomes apparent that being in a teacup with Luffy is a hazard in and of itself.

Once he realizes the spinny disk in the middle doesn't have something to stop it from going as fast as he can manage, we're fucked. Him and Pappag are evil fucking menaces and I don't know if I can ever forgive this one.

I'm half hanging out of the teacup, someone is grabbing me and making sure I don't die, and I'm just begging the conductor for help every… one and a half seconds when I spin past him.

We end up breaking the ride, because of course we do.

I also end up puking in another trash can, because of course I do.

_____

"We're so high up..!" Camie gasps, teary face pressed close to the bubble as we rotate to the top of the ferris wheel. "You can see everything from up here!"

"You're so happy you're crying?" Luffy laughs, reclining on his arms. I smile fondly at her, leaning my head on crossed arms propped up on one of the headrests and enjoying the break from fast-paced rides for a moment. My headache is absolutely hating this adventure, but it doesn't get a say when Camie looks so damn happy.

"This has been my dream since I was a child," she confesses. "This is the highest up I've ever been in my life! I'll never forget this, thank you so much!" Luffy makes a questioning hum. "Hatchan and Pappag only let me come because you guys are so strong, so thank you!"

Me and Luffy both instinctually exchange amused grins before something seems to pass over Luffy's face, then his head snaps back to watching Camie and the view.

I close my eyes and pretend it doesn't sting, even if it's my own fault.

_____

After that it's one of those back and forth pirate ship gondolas, then buying stupid hats, then a wave swinger, then ice cream, then a haunted house, then more snacks and bear-shaped balloons.

Through it all I stick as close to Camie as I can, trying to pay close attention to our surroundings even as my headache gets harder and harder to disregard.

After one last ill-advised spinning ride I really should have skipped, the pain is at an all time high and I'm ushered onto a bench so I can duck my head between my knees.

"Ed, you need to stop pushing yourself! You're not going to get better if you keep brushing off your symptoms until they're impossible to ignore!" Chopper admonishes.

"Sorry, Chops," I groan. "This'll be the last time, promise."

"Don't say that if you don't mean it!" he shrieks back.

"I'm so sorry, Ed. I didn't have to do that last ride, I shouldn't have pushed you to get on it," Camie apologizes, seated beside me.

I glance up from my knees at her guilty look and scoff. "Camie, if you think anyone but myself is responsible for my dumbassery, you'll have to get in line for the blame," I murmur in good humor.

“Ed is really quite bad at knowing when to stop, you shouldn’t feel bad,” Brook hums.

I glare at him balefully and slouch back into the bench. “You’re all the worst,” I grouch.

“Do you need anything, Ed? We can get you some water,” Hachi offers.

“There’s ice cream over there, will that make you feel better?” Luffy asks, jerking his thumb at a stand within eyesight of the bench.

I nod, then grimace as it sends my head spinning like the ride we were on. “Something cold would probably do me some good,” I admit. “And maybe some water too? Sorry to slow the fun down.”

Everyone waves their hand. “No, no! Don’t worry about it!” they all say in unison.

I have to laugh at that. “Alright you goddamn weirdos, go get me sustenance.”

“You and Camie just wait here for a second then, we’ll be right back!” Pappag says, pointing one of his… I still don’t know if starfish have arms, at us and grinning.

I give him a small smile and a thumbs up. “I’ll keep watch!” Camie says proudly.

“I’ll keep watch,” I correct, giving her a teasing smirk. Her cheeks puff up with a pout and I laugh again.

The whole group, minus Camie and I, split off towards the ice cream stand.

“I really am sorry,” Camie apologizes again, but this time she’s smiling.

“You really don’t have to be,” I deny, smiling back. “I’m glad you’re enjoying this so much, you deserve it. If me having to cope with another hell-ride keeps you having fun, I don’t mind at all.”

“You’re really too nice, Ed,” she mumbles, grinning bashfully.

I go to grin back, but another spike of pain lances through my skull so sharply it makes me scrunch my eyes shut with a hiss. I hunch over, my fingers pressing hard into my temples.

“Ed? Are you ok?” Camie asks panickedly, but it’s muffled through the ringing that seems to bleed into my ears.

“I — I’m ok—” I try to gasp through my tightening throat, but the ringing in my skull has turned to screaming and my body is going into panic mode and I don’t know *why*—

A large hand lands on my shoulder. Much too large to be Camie’s.

I slowly tilt my face to look at it. It’s the hand of a pink bear costume, like the one that had sold us balloons earlier.

“Hello..?” Camie says hesitantly.

My gaze follows the hand up the arm to the mask as the head of the costume is pulled back. A face right from a fucking nightmare leers down at us.

“Oh,” I choke out. That explains it. *“Fuck.”*

Chapter End Notes

Damn wonder what that was all about.

Unironically Peterman is one of the most un-fucking-nerving characters in One Piece and I cannot even explain why. I genuinely blocked his existence out of my brain and when I saw him while rereading the manga to write this arc it was an actual fucking jump scare. He scares the shit outta me more than almost any OP villain and I DON'T HAVE AN EXPLANATION FOR IT. I couldn't even write him the way I perceive him because he's just so. Fucking. *Terrifying.*

How could someone write a whole ass vow renewal merely a chapter ago and immediately follow it up with *that?* They mustn't be right in the head.

Anyway guys haha so maybe last chapter was foreshadowing. Just a little teeny bit. It'll be fine though, right?

...Right?

Chapter 106: Chapter One Hundred and Six: I've Been A Captive And A Coward

Chapter Summary

Under The Willow - Shayfer James

Their third mistake; not expecting a cornered pirate to fight like a *cornered* ***goddamn*** *pirate.*

Chapter Notes

FUCK IT EARLY ASS MORNING WEDNESDAY CHAPTER. Like is it 7 in the morning and I haven't gone to sleep yet? Yes. Am I just gonna pull an all-nighter? We'll see how I feel after I stand up from where I've been sitting for the past 8-9 hours. Wait when was the last time I went to the bathroom—

Not sure if we're quite going back to *every* Wednesday updates yet, but I give this as a peace offering in these trying times. Oh hey did I mention this chapter has like. A really huge reveal in it. Because It kinda does. I did not hype this up enough. Like if anyone wants to make a final guess about pseudo dad/uncle's name now might be a good time.

Luffy two chapters ago: Don't get too far out of my range
Ed, near immediately: Damn better sit on this bench alone with the mermaid who is supposed to get kidnapped, I'm sure this won't instantly break that promise

Brace yourselves, this is going to get dark and messy. Like this chapter is a lot. There's lots of violence, maybe a little bit of a murder, an allusion to some SA type stuff (that's limited to like a single comment), a panic attack, some accidental self-harmy things, it's just… a lot. BUT IT'S ALSO FUNNY AND NICE LATER AIGHT????? THERE'S NICE THINGS TOO.

Look Ed's flight or fight response may be fawn 90% of the time, but when they go fight they commit and they commit *hard.* Sometimes murder is ok ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ok, listen.

Had I not been fighting off the mother of all headaches, had I not been fucking violated by what I figure was my fledgling Haki going haywire at the wrong moment, had it been any other second of our trip or any other place, it would have been fine.

I would have shot Peter-guy full of enough holes he would make a better sponge than worm food, kicked his teeth in just for my own satisfaction, then scattered the pieces of his corpse on the doorsteps of all the Human Shops on the island as a warning to whoever tried that shit next.

As it stands, I *was* fighting that headache, I *was* backhanded by my own bullshit Haki, and it *was* that second at that place, so it was decidedly not fine.

It's disgusting how easy it is.

The second I've clocked what's happening, Peter-dude is slapping the hand on my shoulder over my mouth like he had been waiting for it. His grip is unnaturally strong, and the strip of duct tape he had apparently been concealing in his palm glues my mouth shut before I can even think to scream.

He uses that hand to yank my head back until I'm pinned to the bench, the back of it pressed into my neck at an angle that makes me freeze with the absolute knowledge that if this man puts even a bit more pressure down, he'll snap my fucking neck.

"Don't scream, or they die," he says conversationally to Camie, the bear mask dropping back into place. Camie whimpers beside me, but I physically can't look away from where Peter-guy is holding my head. "Good girl. Now listen very carefully, and nothing that bad has to happen."

He's efficient. He's strategic. He's so good at extracting us without making a scene it makes me want to vomit, except I would really rather not choke to death because my *fucking mouth is taped shut.*

He switches which of us he's holding hostage so he can tape Camie's mouth shut too. He wrangles us away from the bench before any of our friends notice we're gone. He gets us to

an isolated alley where he can tie us up without onlookers.

I, being who I am, try to murder him in the alley.

For my efforts I get a violent knock to the skull from some stupid motherfucker I hadn't seen behind me, and pinned roughly to the ground while Camie tries to struggle away from Peter-boy as he ties her up and shoves her in a sack.

I try to gouge his eyes out when he tries to tie me up, and get a nice kick in the ribs for it. I still end up tied up and shoved in a sack, so you know. Fuck that guy.

It hits suddenly, a few minutes into being stuck inside a sack, tied up, and being driven somewhere on a motorized vehicle of some sort under someone's arm.

I just got caught by slavers.

My breath hitches through my nose, and my squirming ceases.

I am going to be put up for auction.

The thought sends such a visceral wave of fear through my whole body what little vision I have is blurred by tears.

I'm going to be sold into slavery.

Oh I'm fucked. I'm real actual fucked, oh my god oh my god oh my *god*—

I start struggling with renewed franticness, honestly hoping whoever has me will just fucking drop me, no matter how high up we are. The person's grip tightens and I'm jostled, then I

hear a muffled sound of pain that undoubtedly belongs to Camie.

I stop fighting. The situation catches up to me, logic breaking back through the panic. I can't just dip, Camie is here. Camie is here and in a lot more danger than I am, and it's my job to protect her so I *cannot* bail, no matter how scared I get.

"Finally," I hear Peter-dude huff.

I resolve myself. I will protect Camie, and I will make any motherfucker who tries to stop me *hurt.*

_____

Right after the handoff is where I go a little… hm. Let's call it *feral.*

I don't pay attention to the words being exchanged by Peterman and whoever he's handing us off to, or when Peterman departs, but I do pay attention when me and Camie are both taken out of those cursed fucking sacks.

Their first mistake; taking the tape off my mouth and untying us in the first place.

Their second mistake; only having one guy holding me because I play 'limp and half-dead.'

Their third mistake; not expecting a cornered pirate to fight like a *cornered* ***goddamn*** *pirate.*

So I go a little bit crazy, sue me.

While the guy who seems in charge, some ugly clown motherfucker, oohs and ahhs over Camie, I suddenly surge up from my limp position and attack the guy holding me like a wild

fucking animal.

First I bite his arm so hard I taste blood and he lets go of me with a startled screech. With free hands I go right for the eyes, nails raking across his face as he starts screaming. Someone lunges for me from behind, and I'm elbowing them hard in the ear. Another one manages to get a hold of my arm, and while I'm trying to gouge *his* eyes out, yet another manages to grab my other arm and then they're lifting me in the air.

"I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL KILL YOU ALL!" I roar, flailing like an irate toddler with legs kicking out and managing to get another guy trying to grab me in the head so hard he crumples to the ground. I try to scratch at the guys restraining me, but can't really reach. I manage one more solid kick before someone gets hold of my legs, and then I'm being slammed hard into the ground on my back.

"Cuff that one! Cuff it now!" The clown in charge yelps, being no help at all.

I snarl and snap at the stupid motherfuckers, twisting in the grip of the minimum five people pinning me, one of which shoves my head down until my cheek is pressed into the rough ground. My wrists are yanked up and snapped into a pair of thick metal cuffs.Their grip on me loosens just enough as they secure them.

They really should make the chains on these shorter.

I manage to get the chain upside down over one of the grunt's neck, then pull it taught with as much force as I possibly can. There's a loud snap that seems to echo through the room as the guy lets out a pathetic gurgle, then collapses on top of me, dead in seconds.

There's a pregnant pause as it sinks in. Then there's a lot more yelling, the grips on me get tighter and rougher, and the body is moved so a thick metal collar can be fastened around my neck. I throw my head around violently, but they still manage to force it shut.

It's Seastone, that's immediately apparent. The effect of my muscles loosening is instantaneous, though not anywhere near as debilitating as whenever I've actually fallen into the sea, which I'd attribute to it not being 100% pure. But much more than that, I feel the

constantly thrumming connection to my Devil Fruit — which I forgot to fucking use *like an idiot* — warble out into a viscerally unnerving silence.

I heave for breath there, pinned and cuffed, while my body shakes in exertion. I can see Camie grappled by two guys across from me, tears running down her face as she futilely tries to yank herself out of their grip.

"Good god, what the hell is wrong with that one?!" the lead clown screeches. "Let's get it in the cage before it kills anyone else!"

I suck in another thick breath of air, and squeeze my eyes shut.

———

They manage to drag us to outside the giant cage before the guy actually in charge, another ugly ass motherfucker but this one with a flowery tophat, comes strolling in to meet us.

He has a pleasant smile on his face that freezes when he gets a look at the guys holding us. "Um. What exactly happened?" he demands crisply.

"The, uh, the human one managed to… kill one of the handlers, knock another out cold, and blind at least one more. There's another one still getting checked out to see if his eye is salvageable," the lead clown explains awkwardly.

"You're kidding," flower hat guy gapes, staring at me.

"You're *next,"* I growl.

The punch isn't entirely unexpected, but neither is the leg I kick right into his dick so turnabout is fair play. The guy hobbles a step or two back, howling in pain before he regains his wits and comes at me like a spoiled child attacking anyone who says no to him.

The clown guys manage to get him off me before he can do anything more than kick me in the face, so I guess they aren't completely useless after all. "Fuck you!" I yell, still trying to kick at the guy.

"I'm not in the habit of selling used merchandise," he bites out, straightening his clothing. "But if you want that so bad, I can make an exception."

That has me freezing. The very real possibility of what these people could do to me is fucking terrifying.

"Oh? Does that scare you?" he taunts, leaning forward to leer down at me. I don't take the bait and kick him in the chin, no matter how much I want to. "Who even is this one? Are they even worth the trouble?" he questions, turning to the lead clown again.

"They're a Supernova, Disco," he answers, frazzled. "The First Mate of the Strawhat Pirates, I believe. Damned Detective or something."

Detective of the Damned, fuckface, I want to snarl, but restrain myself.

"A Supernova?" the newly dubbed Disco muses. "Good find. We'll put this one right after the giant, really keep the momentum rolling."

"Leave Ed alone!" Camie yells. She hasn't stopped flailing since these shits picked her up. "Hatchan is gonna kick your butts so bad!"

"You cheeky little—" Disco starts growling, taking a menacing step towards her before the air pulses and he drops in a dead faint.

I blink at him wide-eyed as me and Camie are both grabbed by frantic clowns and shoved in the cage. Then they're grabbing Disco, and running off yelling for a doctor.

“Ed? Are you alright?” Camie asks hesitantly.

I slowly turn to face her. “Are—” I have to cut myself off with a half-choke, “are *you* alright?” I manage to get out.

Her expression crumples. “Yeah, I’m ok. You took all the heat.”

I nod slowly. It makes the collar touch too many places around my neck, and I’m suddenly hyper aware of it. My shaking hands reach up at a snail’s pace until my fingers meet the cold metal.

It itches.

I take in one more deep breath, then lose complete control of my composure. My fingers scramble at the device, nails clawing around it as my breathing goes totally haywire. I choke and gasp on air, frantically trying to get it away from my throat in any way that I can.

From a distance, I realize I’m having a panic attack.

This has to be the first since… god, since after Aokiji. Or… Sphynica? Or was it in Yuba..? My thoughts are hard to get in track with the loud shitty breathing and half-sobs crowding the air. Someone has delicate and gentle hands on my arms, and I think they’re talking too, but I’m not picking any of that up.

My vision is fading to black at the edges, which is weird to know because I’m not really getting any visual input from my eyes right now, but my brain clinically informs me that means I’m going to pass out.

“Take a deep breath,” someone instructs.

I shake my head, trying to get them to understand what a stupidass thing that is to say at a time like this, but the pressure around my neck increases when I do and suddenly the instruction seems even *more* stupid.

"C'mon, just one. You can do it no problem," they encourage.

This motherfucker. I try sucking in a deep breath, but it gets caught and suddenly I'm not just struggling to breath, I'm actually choking. Oh god, oh god I'm choking I'm going to *die*—

"Good try. Can you do another?" the person requests.

I try again, because the vignette is getting kind of annoying. This time nothing catches, and I get a lungful of air. That feels fucking fantastic, so I keep doing that. Breath after breath, it feels like inhaling heaven.

The voice that was speaking to me is still going, low and rough but with a good rhythm and cadence that my consciousness grapples onto and seizes with all its might. I fight my way back to coherency with enough emotional willpower to part a sea, and when my eyes come back online the first thing I see is the ground.

I'm still on my hands and knees, but I'm definitely further into the cage than I was before. I look up and observe slowly, still breathing heavily and thoughts syrupy. Camie is sat at my left, and she gives me a watery smile when she catches my eye.

"Are you alright?" she asks shakily. "For real this time."

"Yeah," I croak, throat rough and raw like I just gargled sand.

"That's a relief, you looked ready to pass out for a second there," the other voice drawls, and my turn to see its owner is much slower than the realization of who it is.

“Oh,” I breathe out. “You.”

The Dark King Silvers Rayleigh raises an eyebrow and lets his mouth quirk up in a smirk. “Me?”

I blink at him slowly. I take in the silver hair, the vertical scar up his right eye, his glasses and his weird striped facial hair. I take in the fact that the three of us are on the ground right beside the row of crates at the back of the cell, on the opposite side of the giant than we were previous. I watch him slide up from his crouch and drop onto a crate, still smiling.

I’m scrambling forward before I can think about it, leaning forward on his knee with stars filling my eyes. “What is his name?!” I demand, the first and only thing on my mind.

Rayleigh blinks and looks at me for a second. Then his smile widens and he just throws his head back and laughs.

He grins at me with unabashed glee that makes his wrinkled face wrinkle harder. “His name’s Leon D. Coin. I’ve been waiting to meet you, kid.”

———

The ungodly sounds of Disco starting the auction blare into the holding room where we’re all stuck in this bullshit cage, and the clown guys very much do not look happy we have Camie sitting out of order.

One of the guys I fucking clawed the shit out of is back to working, one of his eyes wrapped up in bandages with multiple scratches still visible despite it. Him and another guy had been the first to collect someone to be brought onto the stage, and he had tried telling us Camie — or number 17, as he’d called her — had to sit in her assigned place.

Yeah I snapped my teeth at him once and he very quickly went back to moving the poor son of a bitch going first.

“So, what’re you going here?” Rayleigh asks conversationally, taking a swig from a flask I guess they didn’t feel the need to take from him. I mean to be fair, they only took my guns off me once they managed to… subdue me.

“...In the cage?” I ask slowly.

He waves a vague hand. “In the cage, on Sabaody, however you want to take it.”

I tilt my head back and forth, but that reminds me I’m wearing the collar and I don’t *love t* hat, so I switch tactics and just rest my chin on his knee. I could absolutely get up and sit on a crate, but the sour looks the clowns keep giving me for sitting on the floor are kinda fueling me right now.

“Well, we were *trying* to find you,” I start. “Shakky said to look in the amusement park, and I didn’t handle the rides very well, and our friends went to go get me water, and then suddenly — bam. Fucking *Peterman.”*

“I’m really sorry, Ed. I said I’d keep watch and instead got us both shoved in sacks,” Camie sniffs, curled up on top of one of the crates in between Rayleigh and the giant.

I make a disagreeing sound. “Nah, it’s my fault. Don’t feel bad about it.”

“Looking for me though, huh? Seems you did your job pretty well,” Rayleigh remarks. Then he shifts his sleeve so it’s covering his hand and raises it towards me, pausing before getting too close. “You’ve got some blood on your face. May I?”

I blink a couple times. “Oh. Yeah, sorry. Didn’t mean to get that on your pants,” I mumble, lifting my chin off them.

Rayleigh laughs. “I don’t care about that,” he dismisses. Then he wipes his sleeve across my mouth, doing a second swipe over my chin and across my cheeks, which I belatedly realize were crusty with dried tears. Damn bitch, I am a *mess.* “There we are. You fucken bite someone?” he asks, amused.

I squint for a second, then blink again. “Huh. Yeah, I totally bit a guy. *Yikes,* sorry you had to see that, Camie. That was… kind of a lot,” I apologize, grimacing while the events of the past few minutes catch up to me. *“Geez.* I fucking *lost it.”*

Camie gives me a wet laugh. “No, no. Seeing you fighting so hard was really inspiring, actually,” she confesses.

The clown guys return and haul off the next people. Some people beg and scream and get tranquilized, but others go silently and resigned. I fucking *hate* this. The giant shifts beside us, making his massive chains rattle loudly.

Rayleigh shucks his sleeve, now slightly covered in half-dried blood, up his arm and I catch sight of something on his inner arm, up near the crook of his elbow. I frown and reach out to poke it. “You have a tattoo?” I ask. I don’t remember him having a tattoo..?

Rayleigh looks down at it and snorts. “Yeah, I let Coin tattoo me when I was drunk,” he explains with a nostalgic smirk, twisting his arm to show me.

It’s a compass rose with an elongated point stretching towards his wrist. The parts of the compass that aren’t filled with black are swimming with details — there’s varying degrees of thickness to the lines, some of them thick and the others thin with a precision that’s uncanny. They’re delicate but purposeful and most of all *impressive as fuck.*

I can actually feel the stars pop out of my eyes at his words. *“Coin* tattooed you?!” I gasp, leaning in closer. Good *god,* it feels so weird and fucking good to finally have a name to use.

Rayleigh laughs like he has to, looking a little bit like this is blowing his mind. “Yeah, kid. Most of this was added after the fact, he was adamant we cover up his shitty first pass any

way he possibly could." He points his finger across the tattoo. "That's his name right there, half of the thing was just to disguise it!"

I track across the lines he pointed out with my own fingers, awe clear on my face. "Wow," I breathe. "It blends in pretty damn well until you know what you're looking for, he must be pretty talented."

"Coin wanted to black the whole thing out, he was terribly embarrassed when we all finally sobered up," he cackles, eyes far away as he recounts the memory. "I made him leave most of it uncovered to remind him of his bad decision making. He didn't so much as *look* at any alcohol for a month!"

"What finally broke him?" I ask, pinkie nail dragging across the outline.

"We met up with the Whitebeards and he got so relentlessly teased he had to drink himself into a stupor," Rayleigh deadpans. "And then one of them managed to convince him to do an entire backpiece at an insanely discounted rate — which is really for the best, since he couldn't see straight the entire time he was doing it."

I burst out laughing so hard I nearly bash my forehead into his knee. After a second I'm back in focus and giving him a grin. "I hope to god he went back and fixed it as nice as this, for that poor son of a bitch's sake."

"Of course he did. Didn't charge for that part at all," he chuckles. "Coin's an artist through and through, that always came before crew rivalry or even being Quartermaster to him."

The stars aren't just popping out, they're exploding like goddamn sparklers. *"He was* ***Quartermaster—"***

This is amazing. This is incredible. I'M LEARNING SO MUCH.

“Tell me about him *please,* I’ve been dying to know anything since fucking Skypiea. Actually, since fucking Reverse Mountain. *C’mon,”* I beg, clutching onto his ugly patterned capris. Man, is there something about pirates that makes them predisposed to ugly patterned pants?

Rayleigh raises an eyebrow. “You really don’t know anything about him? Huh,” he mumbles, looking contemplative.

“Did he know about me?” I ask. “I mean besides me existing. Did he know my name or anything like that?”

He shakes his head, that fond smile making its way back onto his face. “Nah, he always just called you his kid.” Rayleigh suddenly barks out a loud laugh and leans forward to smack the knee I’m not monopolizing. “Damn, I’m gonna owe him a drink whenever he comes back around!”

I want to ask another question about that, but the clowns return for the next people and one of them (not one I fucking mauled) glowers at us. “Keep it quiet,” he snaps. Me and Rayleigh shoot him a combined stink eye so foul he turns around like he saw nothing and keeps hauling the person the other clown had out of the cage.

The giant huffs a quiet laugh that’s really more ‘exhale’ than ‘laugh.’ I peer up at him, turning to rest my cheek on Rayleigh’s thigh. The giant takes notice of my gaze and raises an eyebrow down at me, stretching out the crescent scar spanning under his eye.

“You want something?” he asks, voice gruff but not mean.

I blink twice. “Ah, sorry. I just — what’s your name? I kinda feel like an asshole just calling you ‘the giant’ in my head,” I confess.

He blinks twice back, just looking at me for a second. Then he turns his head away to keep staring at the wall. “Stansen,” he responds.

I smile even though he's not looking, crossing my arms over more of Rayleigh's leg because the contact is pretty grounding. "Ok, cool. I'm Ed." Stansen grunts in acknowledgment, but says nothing further.

There's a tap on my hand. I look over as Rayleigh lifts it and inspects my ring. "You hitched?" he asks. "This looks pretty new."

I shrug with a snicker. "Yeah, hitched. And kinda. It wasn't super *planned* and more just *happened,* which seems to be a running theme for me."

Rayleigh barks another loud laugh and places a solemn hand on my shoulder. "Sometimes marriage just happens *to* you," he commiserates.

"You have no idea how validating it is to know this happens to other people," I deadpan.

"You know, Coin and Gaban were married for a while," Rayleigh muses. "They got Roger to do it while they were all plastered balls to the damn wall. Actually… did we ever get that annulled..?"

I don't think I have ever loved someone I've never met more than this man.

Camie sniffs and lets out another wet laugh, beaming at me when it catches my attention. "This really isn't as scary when you're talking like this," she says sincerely.

I give her a genuine smile as my shoulders slump a little further. "Just being myself. Don't worry, Camie. Everything's going to be just fine," I sooth. "No matter what happens, my Captain is at the very least on his way. And he's not gonna stand for anything happening to either of us."

Luffy may not be happy with me right now, but by *god* will he not leave me in this place.

Her smile is wobbly, but sweet and full of trust. “Hatchan won’t rest until we’re alright, either,” she states, believing it with her whole chest.

I open my mouth to respond, but—

“Get the mermaid ready, and make it fast!” one of the clowns instructs.

Camie’s smile freezes on her face. Mine drops right off my own. I’m already halfway to lunging to the feet as the clowns approach us, but stop myself at the last second. I have to believe my own words, and be fucking *patient.*

My hands clench tight in the fabric of Rayleigh’s pants. I keep desperate eye contact with Camie as the clowns grab her arms and haul her up. She keeps her own terrified eyes locked on mine, still trying to give me a reassuring smile despite herself. She just keeps nodding as they drag her out and away from my sight.

“No move yet?” Rayleigh murmurs.

“No move yet,” I mumble, eyes squeezing shut and head dipping down.

Rayleigh’s hands land on my shoulders. “Your call.”

I give him a jerky nod. “I fucking *hate* clowns,” I say tightly.

“I’m partial to a few,” Rayleigh comments, his hands smoothing out across my shirt. “These ones, not so much.”

I look back at him and try to remind myself that Camie is in very good hands, in *Luffy’s* hands.

“Yeah? I mean, Buggy was funny, but his beast tamer’s lion stabbed me. I’m only not holding a grudge ‘cause he got kicked in the dick. Like *a lot,”* I ramble, hoping it’ll distract me until we can get the fuck out of here.

Rayleigh snorts. “Yeah, that tracks.”

Please let Luffy hurry the fuck up.

Chapter End Notes

Have you really been friends with a tattoo artist if you didn't let them brand you with their name while you're both drunk off your asses? No? Just a Coin and Rayleigh thing, I guess. Which could mean nothing.

Try and guess which Whitebeard has that backpiece. I dare you.

Also and here's art of Rayleigh and the tattoo, because I have no chill and did not draw this shit on my own arm to understand how it would work just to NOT make art of it and that hot old man.

CONGRATULATIONS YOU PIECES OF SHIT YOU SURVIVED TO LEARN PSEUDO DAD/WEIRD UNCLE'S NAME! I am sincerely sorry his name is not Papa John. I know many of you were rooting for that. Or Little Caesar. Or Pizza Hut. Or anything else pizza related. I know I let you all down, I hope you can forgive me.

EXCEPT THAT MOTHERFUCKER WHO GUESSED HIS NAME CORRECTLY IN AN ASK WITHOUT POSING IT AS A QUESTION JUST SO CASUALLY I DIDN'T CLOCK IT UNTIL LATER, RICKY WHEN I CATCH YOU RICKY—

Chapter 107: Chapter One Hundred and Seven: If I Found My Body In Chains

Chapter Summary

> *The Craving (Single Version) - twenty one pilots*
>
> “Judging by the screaming, that would be my darling husband arriving,” I answer, feeling absolutely fucking smug at the clowns looking more panicked by the second.

Chapter Notes

> I'm going to the beach tmr, pray for me not getting sunburnt AGAIN like LAST YEAR. I'm bringing UNEXPIRED SUNSCREEN this time so I'll CRY if I BURN. Dearly hoping there is no hurricane weather because I am very scared of thunderstorms and do not want to get electrocuted 😌
>
> UUUUUUUUUUHG I JUST KILLED A MASSIVE FUCKIN SPIDER WITH MY SHOE BRO THANK *GOD* I KEEP A PAIR IN HERE WHY WAS HE IN MY ROOM WHY DID HE TRY TO HIDE UNDER THE BOARDY THINGY THAT GOES *BETWEEN MY DOOR AND THE HALL* WHY DID HE TRY AND TRAP ME IN AND WHY DID HIS GUTS EXPLODE EVERYWHERE I HATE SPIDERS SO MUCH SWEET MARY WHITE LORD JESUS WHAT MONK DID I PUSH DOWN THE STAIRS IN A PAST LIFE TO DESERVE THIS CONSTANT FEAR AND TORTURE
>
> Ok I flushed it's corpse down the toilet I am calm now and would like to apologize to that monk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a commotion on stage that has everyone left in the cell, just me Rayleigh and Stansen at this point, turning towards the entrance to (what I assume is) backstage.

“Bring her out!” someone demands, loud enough we can hear it clearly in here.

I’ve shuffled up onto a crate at this point — my knees were killing me, and pissing off some random clowns really isn’t worth the pain — and I glare out at the two still loitering about the

holding room.

I start stretching out my legs then arms, wincing when the chains start chafing around my wrists. I guess when I fucking garotted that guy earlier I really fucked them up, the bandages are pretty torn up near the bottom and there's bloody lines bit into the skin that sting like a bitch.

My musings are interrupted by a loud crash from somewhere in the building. I slide to my feet with a smile, doing more stretches while the clowns exchange nervous looks.

"That your cue?" Rayleigh asks, idly adjusting his glasses.

"I'm going to take it that way," I hum, reaching down to touch my toes then switching to bend back, feeling my spine crack and sighing in relief. "Honestly I'm a little disappointed I didn't get my chance on stage, I wanted to see how high I could ramp up my price. I was gonna do a cartwheel and everything."

"What exactly was that?" Stansen asks, glancing down at me with a look of judginess and incredulity.

"Judging by the screaming, that would be my darling husband arriving," I answer, feeling absolutely fucking smug at the clowns looking more panicked by the second.

The loud sound of a gunshot ricochets through the air. We all pause at that, and one of the clowns gives the other a nervous look before running to go check it out.

"Good or bad?" Rayleigh asks, tucking his flask away. "Either way I'm all out of booze, so I'm ready to head out."

"Bad," I answer, frowning. "Aw man, I'm gonna miss all the fun!" I whine dejectedly. There's another shot, then another, then the air itself seems to waver. A full body shiver

works its way through me and I pause, then hang my head miserably. “I just missed my Captain punching the shit out of a Celestial Dragon, didn’t I?”

Rayleigh throws his head back and laughs.

“It’s about to get fuckin’ rowdy our there, can you get this thing offa me? I’ve got it from there,” I ask, poking at my collar.

“Yeah, no problem,” Rayleigh says nonchalantly, standing up even as the remaining clown starts frantically yelling at us.

Rowdy is fucking right — it gets so damn loud out there that the collar, which Rayleigh rips off my neck without an ounce of trouble and chucks out of the cell, exploding in the face of the clown isn’t even a disturbance.

I whoop, taking the first real deep breath since the damn thing was clicked shut. “You need a hand with yours?” Rayleigh offers to Stansen, but I’m more focused on other things.

The sensation of my Devil Fruit flooding back into me is heavenly, and it’s absolutely nothing to just grab the chain of the cuffs and turn a couple links apart. Once my hands are separated, it’s only a matter of dismantling the cuffs until there's enough room to wiggle my wrists out.

I skip over to the door of the cell and twist the lock right off the bars, kicking it open with a giddy cackle. “Yo Rayleigh, do you know where they put my shit?” I call, squinting around for my guns or anything and stomping across the cooked clown while I do. I think I’ve earned a little vindication, aight?

“Let’s stop by the office, I plan to rob these people blind,” Rayleigh suggests, following me out with an easy smile as Stansen wrenches the bars apart to make room for himself to exit.

So we stop by the office and rob these people blind. Thank fuck my guns are also there, because I think I would have burst into tears if I lost them. Stansen has just been following us silently, looking both quizzical and amused.

“It sounds like the place is in chaos,” Rayleigh comments when we make it backstage. “Ah — seems there’s a damsel in distress. Would you mind?”

Stansen grunts, and I can feel the pulse of Conquerors Haki leave Rayleigh as our giant friend digs his hands into the wall separating us from the rest of the room and wrenches a massive fissure in it.

There’s a visceral silence from the auditorium as Rayleigh steps out, the body of Saint Shalria out cold on the floor beside the stupid glass bubble Camie had been trapped in, the top sliced off as she watches him with wide eyes.

“Told ya, chaos. Looks like the auction is over,” he says casually. “I’ve got my money, so guess I’m going back to the gambling houses to throw it away.”

“You’re one messed up old man. You got locked up just to steal some money?” Stansen says disparagingly.

“I was planning on robbing whoever bought me too, which in retrospect is a little dumb. I mean, who would buy an old man?” Rayleigh laughs. “Oh — but you said you were looking for me earlier,” he says, turning back to me as I jump over some of the fallen chunks of the wall. “Guess that comes before more drinking.”

“Gee, thanks. Nice to know you have priorities,” I mutter, trotting up behind the dumb glass container. “See, Camie? Told you it’d be fine!” I say with a grin and a wink.

She gapes at me, nodding numbly with so much relief in her eyes she seems paralyzed by it.

The silence of the amphitheatre is broken by someone hissing “what the fuck?!” and suddenly all the guards are losing their shit.

“Rayleigh?!” Hachi yelps from out in the seats.

Rayleigh squints past the stage lights then grins wildly. “Hey! Hachi, what’re you doing here?! It’s been forever! Yeesh, who shot you?” He sweeps his eyes across the crowd and sighs. “Right, got it. Nice bit of trouble you’ve got yourself in, eh? And those folks must be the cavalry.”

The heady feeling of Rayleigh’s Haki floods the room like a tidal wave, sending all the armoured guards and the stupid fucking clowns crumpling to the ground like puppets with their strings cut. It’s like a heavy blanket of ozone, and it dissipates just as fast as it appeared.

“That straw hat suits you pretty well, fearless as you are. I’ve wanted to meet you, Monkey D. Luffy,” he drawls.

The auditorium is dead silent for a long moment.

I hop around the curve of the bubble because it’s real hard to see through it, and smile wide at my crew. “Hey guys!” I holler, waving my arms over my head. “Miss me?”

The silence breaks with a cacophony of familiar voices, all layering over themselves with shouts of my name, concern and relief palpable in equal amounts.

“Ed! Are you alright?!” Luffy demands from the aisle, closest to the stage and looking both furious and distressed.

I take a second to acknowledge I must look like a fucking mess. I can feel the bruise developing on my cheek from Disco’s assault, my neck is scratched to shit from my earlier

panic, the bandages around my wrists are ripped red and fucked up despite the absence of cuffs, and I can still feel the dried blood caked under my nails.

I beam at my Captain and give him a thumbs up. “Yeah, I’m good!”

“Welp, I’ll remove your collar now, young lady. Don’t worry, just keep still,” Rayleigh hums, stepping up to the glass with his hands reaching for Camie’s collar. “Ready?”

“WAIT OLD GUY YOU’RE GONNA BLOW HER UP!” Pappag and Chopper both screech.

I wave my hands in front of me. “Guys chill out! He got mine off fine!”

“Are you sure, Ed?!” Brook shrieks as the collar starts beeping ominously. “THAT DOESN’T *SOUND* FINE?!”

It’s fine. Rayleigh tears the collar off and tosses it over his shoulder, just like with mine, and the thing explodes midair without hurting Camie in the slightest. I give my friends a smug look as they all deflate in relief.

“What the hell was that?! Man, I just got the keys and she’s not even cuffed anymore?” Franky groans, marching onto the stage with the keyring in hand. Then he stops in his tracks and stares at me. “Guys! I found Ed!” he announces, pointing at me and offhandedly throwing the keys over his shoulder towards the designated area with all the people who were already sold. “Oh, here. Buyers all ran, may as well make a break for it.” Then he turns back to me again and bursts into tears. “LITTLE BRO!” he wails, running right at me.

I laugh and open my arms wide, letting him sweep me up in a tight hug. “We found them first!” Sanji shouts from the audience. “You aren’t special! HEY! ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING?!”

I kick my legs around until Franky puts me down. “Good job with the keys. Can you carry Camie out of here?” I ask, trying not to feel the lingering hint of nervousness as I head for the edge of the stage.

“Wait, who is this guy?” Franky asks, pointing at Rayleigh, who just makes an amused huff.

“Sometimes I worry about how unworldly you all are,” I sigh, jumping down and walking up the aisle towards my crew and stepping over fallen guards. I also kick one of the clowns, just because I can. Like I said, it’s *earned* vindication.

Luffy meets me halfway. We both stop face to face, me having to look up at him because he’s a step higher than I am. I can see his gaze tracking across my injuries with an unreadable look, and tilt my head so he’ll focus on my eyes.

“You ok?” I ask.

His face scrunches up like I said something stupid. “Yeah, I’m ok. You’re good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I repeat, smile soft.

That’s enough. Luffy’s arms are snapping around me with enough force to crush a mountain, hauling me up to his step and nearly tripping backwards when I push back with the same intensity. I hold him back just as tight, gripping his shirt like a lifeline as I bury my face in the junction of his neck.

“Fuck,” I gasp, breath stuttering in my chest. Oh my *god,* it’s hitting all at once. The second I’ve got the familiar weight of my Captain pressed into me the past few hours have just decided they can be processed now. *“Fuck.”*

“It’s ok,” Luffy says firmly, his fingers digging into the hair at the base of my skull and tightening around my ribs. I hiss when he accidentally presses into where one of Peterman’s

guys kicked me, and he quickly readjusts his arm higher. “Who..?” he growls, voice so fucking angry I duck my head further into him.

“It’s ok,” I parrot, muffled though it is. “I fucken killed one of them. And blinded one and a half other guys. And probably gave a couple nasty concussions,” I mumble into his skin. “I also bit a guy. They may have gotten me but by *god* did I not make it easy for them.”

Luffy jerkily nods into my shoulder. “Good.” He pulls back enough to see my face, but doesn’t remove his arms. “Damnit Ed, I *just* told you not to get too far out of my range!” he berates, but the look in his eyes makes me smile.

I laugh, slightly wet, and quickly wipe off my face just to make sure I wasn’t crying at all. “I know, I know. I’m sorry, love. It really was pretty shit of me to instantly break a vow *immediately* after we renewed them.”

“Damn right,” he huffs, taking hold of one of my hands and stepping back to give me one more scan from head to toe before giving me a stately nod.

The rest of the Strawhats take this as their cue to approach. Nami is the first to reach us, wrapping me in a quick hug (I can only return it with one arm, since Luffy won’t let go of my hand) before pulling back and ghosting her fingers over my bruised cheek with worried eyes.

“You’re sure you’re alright? God! We were so worried!” she frets. Then her face flattens out and she smacks me on the shoulder. “And what’s this I hear about you renewing your vows?! You couldn’t wait for the rest of us?!”

“Ow!” I whine, even though it didn’t hurt. “I’m sorry, we didn’t do it on purpose! It just kinda happened! And Chopper and Brook were there, so there was crew representation!”

“I am glad to have witnessed at least some form of your union, even if it was comparably much smaller than your original ceremony,” Brook states, smiling as much as a skull can. “I am also very glad you’re relatively unharmed, Ed.”

“You’ve stuck me as the only crew member to witness both ceremonies! That’s a lot of pressure!” Chopper shrieks from where he’s still tending to Hachi. “And don’t think you can get away from medical treatment, I’m tending to those wounds when I’m done here!”

“I’m certain you handled incarceration with grace, Detective. We, on the other hand, did not take it so well,” Robin comments, coming up and rubbing her hand through my hair.

“I *definitely* missed something. What the hell is going on?” Zoro demands, looking fucking bewildered by the the events of the past few minutes.

“Ed almost got sold into slavery, you fucking numbskull!” Sanji hisses, kicking Zoro in the shin before solemnly grabbing my free hand and cradling it in his own. “Who do you want me to kill, my darling?” he asks with 100% seriousness.

I throw my head back and laugh. “I mean, if you happen across Disco or Peterman go ahead. No need to seek them out though, karma will come for their ugly asses eventually.” Then I tilt my head consideringly. “Though if you wanna track down Peterman, rip his face off with a rusty utensil and serve it to me on a dinner plate, I wouldn't mind fucking eating it in front of his disgusting faceless body.”

There’s a moment of silence. “Wow, this experience has made you very macabre,” Robin deadpans.

“This has turned you into a cannibal!” Usopp wails. “It’s made you bloodthirsty and crazy!”

“Wait did Ed get *kidnapped?”*

Everyone ignores Zoro. “I was kidding!” I squawk, frantically waving my hands (and by extension Luffy’s arm) and laughing. “I don’t actually want that! I mean the skinning him thing, sure, but not the eating thing!”

“Sweet god, I thought I escaped this…” I can hear Law groan from his seat.

“You never fucking stop, do you?” Kid grumbles from his place by the door.

Oh, I forgot those idiots were here. “Spectators, eh? And if they’re still up after that blast, not amateurs either,” Rayleigh comments, suddenly right fucking beside us.

“W — Who the hell is this guy?!” Usopp shrieks, diving behind one of the seats.

“And what was that thing he did?” Sanji grunts, shifting his weight lower.

“I — I think that was Haki? I don’t really know much about it…” Hachi mumbles from his spot on the ground.

“Yup. Haki,” I confirm with a nod.

“You know about Haki, Ed?” Hachi questions.

“I’m from Canada, of course I know what Haki is,” I deadpan. I mean, no one gets the pun but it was funny to me specifically. Actually, Rayleigh laughs too, so I’m taking this as a complete and total win.

“I thought you were Swimerican?” Luffy asks with a tilt of his head. I collapse in half from laughing.

“A man like that here, who would have thought?” Law mutters with wry amusement.

“Dark King Silvers Rayleigh… what’s a legend like that doing in a place like this?” Kid drawls, low and gravelly.

“Around here I’m just Ray the ship coater,” Rayleigh says lightly, mouth tugging into a smirk. “I wouldn’t throw that name around too much. I’m an old man now, I’d rather live a peaceful life.” He crouches down and sweeps his eyes across Hachi’s bandages. “Looks like you’ll live, Hachi. You used to be so careful about walking around this archipelago, don’t let that habit slip.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” Hachi mumbles, looking thoroughly chastised.

“Thanks for saving my friend, folks. I appreciate it,” Rayleigh continues, smiling at my crew.

“Do you know this old guy, Ed? And what was that about you wanting to meet me?” Luffy asks, brow furrowing.

“Well Hachi is our friend, and he’s his friend, and he’s also my friend now — that’s non-negotiable, by the way — so it’s just a big friendship parade in here,” I say flippantly.

Rayleigh barks a laugh. “Whatever you say, kid. And let’s save that discussion for later. First we need to worry about getting out of here,” he suggests, rising to his feet.

I’m a shit disturber at heart, so I turn so I can antagonize Kid. “Kid, did you come all this way to save me?” I coo, knowing damn well that is not the case.

“Why the fuck would I have done that?!” he shouts, face twisting into a snarl.

“I appreciate the thought, but you were basically no help at all and I don’t really give out sexual favours!” I leer, because goddamnit it’s fun.

“I AM GOING TO *KILL YOU—”* he screeches before Killer is pulling him back by the shoulder and patting him on the back.

“C’mon, deep breaths,” he says flatly while Kid tries to get his shit together. Damn, I actually missed doing that, and it’s only been like a day. Plus the laugh Law tries to muffle so poorly it’s audible from here is so worth it.

“We’ve been surrounded this whole time, yeah?” I sigh, then give Rayleigh a look that absolutely says ‘this is totally your fault but I’m not gonna *say* that.’ “I wonder who they’re here for? I mean, there’s… 6 Supernovas? It could really be any of us!”

Rayleigh just hums and pretends to rub at his beard to disguise a smile and a laugh.

“Alright, criminals! Release Saint Rosward and his family immediately!” a voice rings out, tinny with the sound being projected through a Transponder Snail. “An Admiral will be arriving shortly! I’d recommend you surrender immediately!” I open my mouth to quip something. “AND DON’T BLAME US FOR WHATEVER HAPPENS, YOU DAMN ROOKIES!” the guy adds with significantly more heat than is necessary.

“...I think he’s mad,” I say, also entirely unnecessarily. “You think if we just kinda… tossed these inbred sons of a horse’s cock out at them they’d leave us alone?”

“I cannot believe I missed you,” Nami weeps into her hands.

“We’re just innocent bystanders, why’re they treating us like accomplices?” Law groans, looking amused despite himself.

“I knew you idiots were insane, but seeing exactly *how* insane firsthand… well, I can’t say I’m complaining,” Kid sneers, red lips stretched in a messy smirk. “Still, I don’t feel like sticking around to fight an Admiral!”

“I’m not using that power of mine any more, so it’s all up to you. It would be hard to stay off the radar with the Marines knowing who I am,” Rayleigh warns, giving me a wink. I roll my eyes.

“I don’t need a senior citizen to fight for me,” Kid scoffs, pushing off the wall and strolling down the tunneled exit. “The longer we wait the worse it’ll get out there. I’m out of here.” Then he glances over his shoulder with a mean smirk. “While we’re at it, we’ll do you all a favour! You keep sitting pretty, we’ll clean up outside!”

Aw, he thinks we’re pretty?

There is no stronger motivator than these stupid fucks’ competitive streak. Luffy looks conflicted for a moment, staring down at my hand then out at the tunnel with longing as Law shoots to his feet immediately, taking after Kid like he just called his mother a whore.

I roll my eyes, dropping Luffy’s hand of my own accord and pushing him up the stairs with an indulgent smile. “Go show him up, hah?”

“You got it!” he hollers, sprinting up the stairs to join the other two Captains.

“Idiots, they’re all idiots!” Nami moans into her hands. “Is this kind of stupidity just a Captain targeted disease?!”

“This is about to turn into a huge brawl, isn’t it?” Usopp hisses. “We should get out of here while we have the chance, we can’t exactly afford to stick around!”

Haha. Yeah the rest of us (minus Chopper, who’s watching Hachi, and Franky, who’s carrying Camie) are already headed for the door.

“Move it, guys! Let’s blast through them in one shot!” Zoro states.

“Sounds good,” Sanji agrees.

“I have a lot of pent up aggression and a desperate need to wrap this shitshow up so I can sit the fuck down!” I announce.

“If we get split up, let’s regroup at Grove 13 later, alright?” Rayleigh says, hauling Hachi up onto his back.

“Grove 13? Sure thing,” Zoro agrees.

“Hey Zoro, I’m pretty sure you owe me 13,000 berri,” I suddenly remember, turning to him with a shit eating grin.

“What? No,” he immediately denies, and I can see him rapidly thinking through the past few hours to figure out if I’m right.

“Oh yeah? What Grove is the ship parked in?” I ask with a cheshire grin.

“Grove 1!” he snaps.

I make a loud incorrect buzzer sound. “Nope, not at all. We’re *currently* on Grove 1, the ship is on Grove 41. You owe me, green boy!” I cheer.

“You guys are hilarious,” Rayleigh cackles, throwing his head back.

“We know,” I sing, then spin around to him. “Do you think there’s any chance Shakky will have food ready for when we get there?” I ask, turning the puppy dog eyes up as high as they’ll go.

Rayleigh laughs and rolls his eyes. “I think those lights coming out of your skull will send up a signal for her. I should have known you’d be a sucker for her cooking, the resemblance is uncanny.”

I’ve got nothing to do in response to that but beam.

“You guys don’t understand what’s going on at all!” Usopp shrieks. “It’ll be a miracle if Zoro even finds the *door!”*

“How about you, Stansen?” Rayleigh calls back to our giant companion.

“All of us were on the verge of becoming slaves, so I’m gonna help them all escape!” Stansen calls back, jerking a finger at the cheering crowd of people, now free from their cuffs and collars.

“Right, try not to make too much of a scene,” Rayleigh laughs.

“Old guy! Little guy! And you Strawhats too, if we ever meet again I’ll make sure to repay this debt to you somehow! Thank you for your help!” he announces, smile broad across his face as all the people with him shout their thanks as well.

“Don’t worry about it! Good luck out there!” I holler over, waving with a grin.

_____

Most upsetting news of the day: by the time we go running out the doors of the auction house, half the damn Marines are already down.

There’s stray chunks of metal, random weapons and a bunch of random body parts strewn about like a weird art display, and… Luffy is tiny.

“Damnit, you assholes couldn’t save more for the rest of us?” I complain.

“What the hell was that?!” Zoro hisses.

“Of course those two are Devil Fruit users, too,” Sanji huffs.

“Amazing! I can’t believe my eyes!” Brook gasps. “Though, I don’t have any eyes! Yohohoho!”

“Way to go overboard, Captain,” Shachi mumbles, him Penguin and Bepo trailing behind us.

“So short tempered,” Killer tuts, rolling out with the Kid Pirates delegation.

Rayleigh just bursts out laughing. “You guys sure took care of that!”

“What’s up, Strawhat-ya? You look a little tense,” Law drawls, staring down at little Luffy.

“Really?” he responds, voice high and squeaky.

“Their formations are shite,” Kid scoffs.

There’s only a brief second before the Marines are screaming nonsensical orders and taunts, something about securing hostages and something about shooting people without Devil Fruits, their organization really is a joke.

“You think if I just…shot the guy with the Transponder they’d all just lay down and cry?” I mutter over to Zoro.

He surveys the Marines with a look of such profound disapproval I feel bad for them. “Unironically, yes.”

Damn well now I *can't,* it just wouldn't be a fair fight. I mean, not that it isn't already.

"They don't even have a plan anymore. It's a totally free-for-all," Kid chuckles, then turns to Luffy as he pops back up to full size. "Strawhat. This may have been something of an extension of our neutrality agreement, but next time I won't show you any mercy."

Luffy just kinda looks at him for a second before turning back to the threat and smiling. "Sure, but I'm gonna be the one who finds the One Piece!"

Killer suddenly shoots past us, catching the axe blade and slicing the shit out of a Marine who tried to attack Kid so he can keep staring blankly at Luffy, executing a sick ass backflip while he does it.

"Kid, what are you standing around for?" Killer calls.

"Killer. On our course, saying that would get you nothing but laughs," Kid says, amber eyes still locked on my Captain. "It's just like I told your scheming slut of a First Mate, I killed every single person who did."

I make an offended face. *"Scheming?* Motherfucker did you just call me *scheming?!"*

"That's the part you're upset about?" Robin murmurs.

"He isn't *wrong,"* Zoro adds.

"You both suck," I mutter.

"From here on, anyone who doesn't have the guts to say that doesn't have the guts to survive," Kid continues, ignoring us and splitting his face in a wicked grin. "Let's meet again in the New World!"

There's only a second of silence from the group of Captains before Marines are moving once again.

"Let's go!" Kid hollers, and then the Kid Pirates are in motion. It's just a lot of fire, and cutting, and… yeesh.

Some Marine guy goes lunging for Law and he just turns his back. "Bepo," he calls, and just like that the polar bear mink is kicking the *absolute shit* out of the guy while Law just kinda walks off the battlefield.

That's pretty much our cue. "Hey, look," Sanji suddenly announces, pointing behind the crowd of Marines to where the Rosy Life Riders seem to be waiting. "Seems like our escape route is already planned for us."

I blast an impact shot into a Marine taking a run at Luffy, sending him smashing into a couple more trying their luck with my Captain, then twist the other direction and blow a fucking hole in the shoulder of a Marine crouched on the roof of the building with a rifle pointed at us.

"Let's make this quick guys, I'm hungry as fuck!" I shout, spinning my gun with a wide smile.

Luffy gives me an enthusiastic thumbs up. "Thanks, Ed!" he laughs, then turns to the crowd and cracks his knuckles. "What they said! Let's go!"

"RIGHT!"

Chapter End Notes

I offer you some crew comfort, goofs, and ass kicking in these trying times. Poor Zoro has no idea what the hell is happening, my man fell through the roof five minutes ago after being dragged halfway across the archipelago by a flying fish and nobody told him *shit,* he just started beating up clowns on instinct 😔

I have something terrible to confess. I like Formidable better than The Craving. I'm so sorry pls don't roast my ass it's just way more compositionally interesting to me and honestly is such a Luffy and Ed song and goddamnit *yes* I had to let it grow on me but it's like an aggressive fungus—
I wanna like the album version of The Craving. I want to like it really bad, I have a very obvious soft spot for every album's obligatory I love Jenna song but I just can't make myself do it and I am endlessly upset about this fact. And even the single version I can only tolerate for so long and it makes me wanna CRY because it's such a sweet fucking song.
I mean I also have a huge soft spot for SAI that I blame entirely on the blindingly bright teal ukulele I got at the end of middle school and learned O Ms. Believer, We Don't Believe What's on TV and fucking Kitchen Sink on. SAI was not for you, it was for me and no shits are given about the propaganda part and I will defend that album until the day I die. I even like fucking Bounce Man ok, I don't even think it's their weakest song. Weakest song on SAI? Yes. But not in their entire discography I will FIST FIGHT YOU
—
Anyway that's my obligatory tøp rant that comes free with mentioning their music I'll see myself out. I will never truly be free of this hyperfixation and it really is everyone else's problem ✨✨

Chapter 108: Chapter One Hundred and Eight: Rayleigh Scattered Across My Eye

Chapter Summary

Lapis Lazuli - The Oh Hellos

“Traumatized! Still traumatized!” I screech, diving into a roll and accidentally taking some poor fucker off his feet. When he scrambles for his gun I react on instinct and just slap him, turning his stomach. I jump back to my feet while he starts hurling his guts up. “No one saw that!”

Chapter Notes

This chapter and the next one were supposed to be a single entity but by GOD does Rayleigh not shut the fuck up. But like also with a chapter name like this I think he gets a pass. LOOK RAYLEIGH SCATTERING BEING A LIGHT PHENOMENA IS SOMETHING THAT CAN BE SO PERSONAL—

I am so mad I didn't get to go to the beach. I'm so mad. Fucking HURRICAIN WEATHER RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—

I spit in the face of physics every time I write Ed fighting. Who gives a fuck? Certainly not me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being plunged headfirst into the fight just to get to the getaway car is a little bit annoying, but honestly getting to fight with my crew and let off some steam is worth it.

“Heeeey! Young Master and friends!” Duval hollers over the crowd, vigorously waving his arms.

“Flying fish guy!” Luffy cheers.

“What’s that?! You called me handsome?! Anyway, your escape preparations are all set!” he yells while the other Rosy Life Riders cheer behind him.

“I’m not thrilled it’s these guys, but beggars can’t be choosers,” Sanji sighs.

“Whooop! Let’s go!” Luffy laughs, jogging along.

Brook jumps in front of an oncoming group of Marines, playing his violin in an incredibly threatening manner. It has that whole group falling unconscious right where they stand, which is great, except Luffy does too.

“Damnit Luffy don’t fall asleep!” Sanji shrieks, smacking him upside the head.

“And you people thought we were weird for wanting a musician!” I cackle, ducking under a Marine’s sword and giving him a swift jab in the temple that has him crumpling to the ground. I crane my neck to look for the other Supernovas but Kid has already cleared out, just leaving Law. “Bye Law! Nice seeing you!” I holler over, waving an arm.

“Leave me alone!” he calls back, otherwise ignoring me.

“I’m gonna make that guy admit he likes me one day,” I snicker, throwing myself into a cartwheel and slamming my foot into a Marine’s face. I twist my gravity until I’m above him and jump, using him as a springboard and fully kicking his head off his body.

I land on the shoulders of another Marine in what basically amounts to a handstand, using that to swing my legs back over the shoulders of *another* one and pinching my knees around his neck. I use the contact of my hands on the first guy to send him hurtling into the sky with a scream.

Bent backwards off the second guy’s shoulders while he frantically leans forward to counterbalance me, I yank my left pistol out and unload it into the crowd in a stream of fire. Once I’ve cleared myself a little space, I jam my gun into the back of the guy’s knees.

As he goes crashing down I plant my hands on the ground and spin his gravity so I have an easier time of just fucking hurling the guy overhead with only the use of my legs around his ears. He smacks into another group of gun toting assholes, sending them all sprawling with screeches.

My feet touch back down on the ground and I straighten up, wiping my forehead with a huff of breath as the guy who suddenly lunges for me is obliterated by one of Usopp's projectiles. "That was so much spinning," I wheeze, rubbing my back. "I'm not good enough at calisthenics to pull that off again."

Uuuugh my muscles are fucking *throbbing* — by the grace of god the my-whatever isn't kicking my ass, but I'm sure feeling all kinds of pain instead.

"Put your hands up!" a Marine shouts, pointing his rifle at me.

"How about no," I groan, cracking my neck. The Marine starts to yell something else, but the guy I sent into the sky comes screaming down and crashes right on top of him, flattening them both a couple inches into the earth. I stare at them for a second then snort. "Loser."

"Ed! Scooch!" Nami commands, Clima-Tact raised above her head.

I scream and make a break for it. My friends also scream and run. Nami calls down lighting with barely an inch of clearance behind us.

"Traumatized! Still traumatized!" I screech, diving into a roll and accidentally taking some poor fucker off his feet. When he scrambles for his gun I react on instinct and just slap him, turning his stomach. I jump back to my feet while he starts hurling his guts up. "No one saw that!"

"Now you're just being cruel," Robin teases as I run up beside her. I stick my tongue out while she grows hands out of a few guys approaching us and knocks them out cold.

We reach the edge of the grove and my friends start jumping down to where the Rosy Life Riders are waiting with their flying fish. I throw myself down after them without hesitation.

_____

"Well, see ya! Feel free to call us anytime!" Duval says cheerfully, attempting that horrible twitching wink thing again. "We'll be there whenever you need us until you arrive on Fishman Island!"

"Sounds good! Thanks, you guys!" Luffy responds as we wave from the roots of Grove 13.

"Please just stop with the winking thing," Sanji adds with a disgusted look.

Duval winks once more, because he can. "Oh wait, one more thing. For you, Ms. Mermaid!" he says, presenting Camie's shell shaped bag.

"My backpack!" Camie gasps. "Thank you!"

"That idiot Peterman had it," he mentions, making me perk up.

"Please tell me that means you left that idiot in pieces," I beg.

"He certainly won't be waking up for a very long time," Duval says jovially. I whoop. "Alright, Rosy Life Riders! Head out!"

"Yes, handsome rose!" the rest of the riders shout as they all take off through the water.

“Why do they keep changing what they say?” Luffy questions.

“Probably trying to find something that sticks,” Sanji responds dryly.

“Let’s hurry inside,” Rayleigh suggests, hiking a very pale looking Hachi higher on his back.

“Yes, we need to get Hachi to a bed so I can stabilize him!” Chopper agrees.

The stairs… the stairs. You get one guess how that goes. Hint; POORLY. I gotta stop for a breather before we’re even a third up, and that just devolves into Sanji sweeping me off my feet with imaginary rose petals swirling around his head. Then Zoro nearly pushes us back down because this isn’t a terribly *wide* staircase, which somehow leads to them racing up the stairs and nearly killing Nami while I laugh, scream and cheer.

Regardless, we make it to the top of the stairs miraculously no more injured than we started. “Hey, Shakky, I’m home,” Rayleigh calls as the door swings open.

“Ray, welcome home. You’re back earlier than I expected, I thought it would take you guys longer to find him,” Shakky greets, smiling warmly at the group.

“Hachi was hurt pretty bad, think you could prepare the bed?” Rayleigh asks.

“Hatchan! That looks terrible, what happened?!” she gasps, ushering us all inside.

It takes no time for Shakky to have Hachi set up in a cot in the middle of the bar while Chopper attends to him. Once he’s settled in, Rayleigh is back on his feet. “Oh, I almost forgot,” he mutters, heading for the back and looking over his shoulder at me. “I’ve got a letter to give you.”

I blink a couple times. “Hah?”

Shakky blinks a couple times as well, then turns to me with dawning understanding on her face. “Oh! You’re Coin’s kid!”

I’m starting to think if I had asked any person over the age of 40 who I remind them of I could have figured this asshole’s name out a hell of a lot sooner.

“Who the hell is Coin?” Zoro asks blandly.

“Ah, right. Guess who finally knows the name of their pseudo dad/weird uncle!” I announce with jazz hands and a giddy smile.

“That’s great, Ed, what does that have to do with anything?” Nami asks confusedly.

Rayleigh comes back into the main part of the bar, sliding an envelope across the counter to me as he sits down on a barstool himself. “I’ve been holding onto that for a long while, I’ll be glad to finally be rid of it,” he laughs.

I pick it up and stare down at the white paper, the word ‘kid’ inked across it in elegant scrawl. I place it back down and take a bite of the sandwich Shakky had made me. “I meant to ask earlier,” I start, not really bother to swallow first, “does Coin have a wicked title too? I mean, being on a crew like yours has to guarantee that, right?”

Rayleigh chuckles, accepting the drink Shakky hands him and taking a swig. “Yup. Funny story behind that one, actually. We were in a fight with the Marines and Coin made this joke; something about being an artist with an exceptionally large needle — because he’s got this sword he calls Needle — *I’m* pretty sure he meant it as a dick joke, but he’ll deny it until the day he dies. Anyway the Marines *really* misunderstood what kind of needle he was implying and—”

“Oh my goodness,” Robin interrupts. We all turn to her wide-eyed stare. She looks surprised she even said words, but continues regardless. “The man on your recording — that’s the Quartermaster of the Roger Pirates; Leon D. Coin, the Tailor of Purgatory!”

Or I could have just asked Robin, I guess.

There's a second of silence as the room processes that. Then all my friends are screaming.

"On the King of the Pirates crew?!" Luffy shouts, ceasing his raid of the fridge to blink rapidly at me.

"Say you're kidding!" Usopp demands, then takes a long sip of his drink just to do a spit take.

"We've been listening to a legend sing through that shell this whole time?!" Nami shrieks.

"T — That's certainly unexpected," Sanji gapes.

"Wow, if you guys are reacting that strongly to the guy not present, how crazy are you gonna go when you finally realize who he is?" I snicker, gesturing to Rayleigh with my sandwich.

Rayleigh snorts. "That's right, I forgot to introduce myself. Silvers Rayleigh, former First Mate of the Roger Pirates, it's nice to meet you," he greets, taking another draw of his drink.

There's another thick moment of dead air. Then the scream restarts, louder.

"HE SAILED WITH THE KING OF THE PIRATES TOO?!" Luffy squawks, teetering dangerously on the stool he's crouched on.

"OH MY GOD THAT'S *SILVERS* RAYLEIGH!" Usopp screeches, fully crying.

“WE’VE BEEN WITH THE FIRST MATE OF THE ROGER PIRATES *THIS WHOLE TIME?!”* Nami wails, also fully crying.

“You guys didn’t know?” Robin asks, looking surprised. “I understand the shock about the first reveal, but him?” Franky just kinda sits there with wide eyes and a gaped mouth.

“They’re certainly names everyone hears at least once,” Sanji strangles out.

“Gold Roger… I think I remember a rookie by that name, but I’m not sure…” Brook says lightly, just chilling and eating more of those beans he had earlier.

“So how do a big shot pirate and an octopus know each other?” Zoro asks, just nonchalantly reclining on a chair opposite the booth all the others are sitting in.

“Hachi saved me when I was stranded at sea. That was back… 20 years ago, I believe, but I’ll never forget it,” Rayleigh answers with a reminiscent smile.

“He saved his life, even though he was only a child at the time,” Shakky adds, looking fondly over at Hachi in the cot.

“We remained good friends after that, until he joined the Sun Pirates,” Rayleigh finishes.

“You mean Arlong, right?” Luffy says offhandedly, back to raiding the poor fridge.

“Still, even though Gold Roger was executed 22 years ago, how did his First Mate — *and* his Quartermaster, for that matter — avoid the chopping block?” Sanji asks, lighting up a cigarette. “The Marines captured the entire crew, didn’t they?”

There’s a pause as everyone in the bar waits for an answer. “The Marines didn’t catch Roger,” Rayleigh says simply. “He turned himself in.”

Everyone makes sounds of surprise, ranging from gasps to whatever weird strangled squawk Usopp produces. I take a bite of my sandwich.

"The government may have made it sound like they captured him, though that was only a show of strength. A point of pride for them to rally around, I suppose," he continues, taking a chaste sip of his drink.

"Why would the King of the Pirates turn himself in?!" Nami asks incredulously.

"Because he saw the inevitable end to our journey," Rayleigh answers, swirling his glass around on the counter. "About four years before his execution, Roger came down with an incurable disease." There's another round of gasps and I take another bite of my sandwich. "Despite all his strength, fatal illness is fatal illness. There was one man with the skills to help ease his suffering; a lighthouse keeper on the Twin Capes named Crocus."

Brook pauses in eating his beans at the name, and turns to Rayleigh with his full attention. "We asked him to accompany us on our final voyage as the ship's doctor. And after three years of holding off Roger's death, he managed the impossible. Roger conquered the Grand Line," he finishes, looking melancholic despite himself.

"Did you say Crocus?! At the Twin Capes?!" Brook exclaims, making a wounded noise and burying his face in skeletal hands. "Ahh, that takes me back!"

"Woah, that's crazy! I thought that old guy just lived in the lighthouse for 50 years!" Usopp gasps, jolting forward before sinking back into his seat. "He really sailed with the King of the Pirates?"

Nami's head perks up. "Come to think of it, he did say he was a ship's doctor for a while. So I guess he spent those three years with you?" Then her eyes snap to mine and widen further. "And the spyglass he gave you! Holy shit, everything is connected!"

"Spyglass?" Rayleigh prompts.

I tug the leather tube off my belt, then pull my spyglass out and hand it to him. “Crocus gave me this, he said he got it from an old friend. Given the whole… coin thing, I think it’s fair to assume who it belonged to.” I laugh a little. “I also went digging and know that stamp was commissioned and made in Water 7 some 40 years ago.” I pause then smack my hand into the table with an incredulous groan. “Fucking LDC! It’s not a legal acronym, it’s his stupid initials!”

Rayleigh bursts out laughing, extending the spyglass and looking it over with fond nostalgia. “This is his, alright. Coin made the thing himself, was always tinkering and fiddling with it. And the stamp… he had that custom made based off — well he can tell you that himself. It’s good to know Crocus is still kicking, though! Great guy, fond of whales. He said something about waiting for a certain Pirate crew when he agreed to join up with us,” he hums.

“Brook! I bet he was talking about your crew! What the fuck, everything *is* connected!” Usopp shouts, looking a little like his brain is melting.

“Crocus, you sweet man! You went to such lengths!” Brook cries.

“He was only with us for those three years, but we definitely considered him one of our own. It’s been such a long time, it would be great to see him again,” Rayleigh chuckles, handing me back my spyglass.

Sanji suddenly sits straight up in his seat and snaps, pointing to Chopper. “Do you remember when we were about to be shot into the sky and that guy was yelling at us and we couldn’t agree on what he was saying?”

Chopper blinks twice at him before nodding. “Yeah? Something about coins and elk? WAIT!”

Both him and Sanji point at each other with wide open mouths. “Coin’s ilk! He said Coin’s ilk!” they shriek in unison, then both slam hands into their foreheads. “Oh my god, *everything is connected!”*

What the ever loving fuck? My brow furrows as that settles in. It makes absolute sense, but why the fuck did Blackbeard *know* I was like Coin? Or that I was Coin's. Whatever he was implying by using the word ilk. Goddamnit my life used to be *so* simple. I can worry about this revelation later.

Sanji settles back into his seat and flicks ash into the ashtray, then takes a long drag. "So, what happened after Roger conquered the seas?" he asks.

"That's when the world started calling him the King of the Pirates," Rayleigh answers, finishing off his drink and grabbing the bottle to pour himself more. "Honestly, titles don't hold much meaning for a man about to die. Still, Roger was overjoyed." He lifts his glass to his mouth but doesn't drink it. "He was a man who loved doing everything with pomp and as flashily as he could. Whether it was partying or fighting, he enjoyed living life to the fullest."

Rayleigh huffs a dry laugh. "He seemed to enjoy thinking out plans for the future, even though he wouldn't be a part of it. Eventually, the Roger Pirates were secretly disbanded under his orders. One by one, everyone discreetly left the crew and went their own way. As comrades we risked our lives together, but I know next to nothing about where they all are now."

I take a moment to look across my own crew. I try to imagine not knowing where they are or what they're doing. I take another bite of my sandwich, and realize that was the last of it. Shakky wordlessly slides me a second one.

"About a year after we disbanded, Roger turned himself in. He was taken to the town he was born in, Loguetown in the East Blue, where it was announced he'd be publicly executed." Rayleigh's eyes are hidden by the glare of his glasses. "I've heard that the many of the young faces watching that day have made names for themselves all across the high seas now. The world must have held its breath the day of his execution."

Rayleigh is still wearing that amused smile that seems almost permanent on his face, but he's staring into his cup like he's scrying directly into the past. "I didn't go. Neither did Coin," he spares me a glance. "I'm never gonna forget his last words to me though… 'I'm not gonna die, partner,'" he says, probably imitating Roger's voice.

There's a ringing silence in the bar.

“The World Government, the Marines, they must have been shocked. With one final remark Roger turned the spectacle of his public execution, what should have been a warning to all other pirates, into the grand opening of the Great Pirate Era! In his last seconds he alchemized the dim flame of his life into a raging hellfire that burned across the entire world!” he recounts, smile widening as his voice picks up and eyes get distant.

Rayleigh’s gaze refocuses and he sighs, lowering his glass to the countertop with a dull clink of the ice inside. “I’ve never laughed harder. Or cried harder. Or *drank* harder than that night. Our Captain was an amazing man, and he sure lived one hell of a life,” he finishes with a cathartic smile.

“It’s like a whole different story when it’s told by someone who actually witnessed it,” Nami breathes out.

“It’s almost like Roger created the Great Pirate Era on purpose,” Usopp voices.

“That’s something that can’t be answered… Roger is dead,” Rayleigh states, forgoing his glass and taking a swig right from the bottle. “The only people who can create this era are the people living in it. There’s certainly people still around today who took something from what Roger said in that square.” He tilts his head to regard Luffy. “Your good friend Shanks is probably one of them.”

Luffy pauses with a banana half shoved in his mouth. “You know Shanks?” he asks, muffled though it is.

“You guys know of an East Blue pirate named Buggy?” he asks in return.

Nami and Zoro exchange a look. “Buggy…” they repeat sourly.

“They both apprenticed on our ship,” Rayleigh says with a snort.

“EEEEH? Shanks sailed with the King of the Pirates?!” Luffy yelps.

“Do you have hearing problems?” Rayleigh cackles. “I ran into him on this archipelago about 10 years ago. I noticed he was missing his trademark straw hat,” he pauses and his mouth twitches up, “and his left arm.” Luffy frantically slaps his hands over his mouth as he almost spits up everything he’s been shoving in his gullet. “When I asked about what happened, he just smiled and started talking about you! Ever since that I’ve wanted to meet you, Monkey D. Luffy. See that spirit he saw for myself.”

Luffy finally manages to swallow all his food and grins, tugging on the brim of his hat.

“I can’t in good conscience tell you things Shanks himself didn’t tell you,” Rayleigh warns. “In any case, you’ve done well to make it this far. I’m sure he’s waiting for you out there in the New World!”

“Really? You think so?” Luffy asks eagerly, rocking back and forth with a beaming smile. “Man, I can’t wait to see him again too!”

“Now back to business. I believe you folks wanted your ship coated, right? I think it’s high time I get back to my day job,” Rayleigh says, getting to his feet.

“That reminds me — I couldn’t quite remember the coating cost, but it’s pretty high, isn't it?” Hachi pipes up from the cot.

“Bah, don’t worry about that. I don’t need cash from friends of yours or friends of mine,” he brushes off.

“Really? Thank you Rayleigh!” Hachi awes.

“Woooo! Not sure why, but he’s doing it for free!” Usopp cheers while Nami does that… thing she does where her eyes turn into berri signs.

“We certainly appreciate it. You’re one generous guy!” Sanji chuckles.

“Rayleigh. I have a question,” Robin suddenly announces, standing up straight. Everyone turns to her with wide eyes. “What exactly is the ‘Will of D?’ There was a Poneglyph on a sky island with Roger’s name carved on it in ancient writing. How did he know it? How was he able to use it?” We all watch as her expression pinches. “Please tell me, did you learn what happened during the Void Century? The missing history from 900 years ago?!”

“Yes. We know,” he answers, not even looking at her as her face freezes. “Truth is, we learned all of it. The entire missing history. But Miss… you mustn’t be so hasty.” Robin’s head jerks up. “Just keep moving forward. See, this is your journey now. Us and the people of Ohara might have hurried too much for our own good.”

Sweat beads and slides down Robin’s temple and she visibly swallows. Everyone’s eyes dart between her and the living legend as he speaks.

“Even if I tell you everything you wanted to know right here and now — just as you are, you couldn’t do anything about it. Once you’ve taken the time to see the world, it might change your outlook. And who knows, maybe you’ll reach a different conclusion than we did,” he says, voice slow and low. “But if you still insist on hearing it, I can tell you everything. It’s up to you.”

Robin’s eyes close and she smiles. “No, I’ll pass. I’ll continue my journey,” she decides.

“It’ll all be clear someday,” he promises. “I’m sorry for what happened in your homeland of Ohara. But that doesn’t change the fact that Roger didn’t decipher that writing.” Robin’s eyes flash back open. “We’re pirates, not geniuses or scholars. No match for Clover or the scholars of Ohara. See, Captain Roger just heard the Voice of All Things.”

“Hey, are you sure you want to pass up this incredible opportunity?!” Usopp interrupts, then jumps to his feet with his hand raised. “Hey old guy! I have just one question to ask you! The treasure Roger talked about, the legendary One Piece, is it really—”

"USOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!" Luffy yells at the top of his lungs, slamming a foot on the bartop (I have to pick my sandwich up so he doesn't stomp on it) and startling Usopp so bad he jerks backwards.

We all turn to stare.

"I don't want to know where the One Piece is hidden! I don't even want to know if it *exists!* Every single one of us set out to sea risking our lives without knowing anything, I'd rather give up being a pirate than know! We need to sail and find out for *ourselves!"* he shouts with a harsh glare. "I won't go on a boring adventure!"

The whole room takes a deep breath.

"Sorry, sorry! I — I knew that! It just slipped out of my mouth is all! I don't want to know either! I just remembered, I have I'll-Die-If-I-Hear-Anything-About-The-One-Piece disease! Don't say anything old guy, you'll *KILL ME!* Keep it to yourself!" Usopp shrieks frantically.

Shakky just laughs. "In that case, let me ask you something," Rayleigh pipes up, looking at Luffy up on the bar. "Do you think you can do it? The New World far surpasses anything you can imagine. Your foes will be *powerful.* Knowing that, do you still think you can rule this mighty sea?"

The two of them make intense eye contact for a long moment before Luffy's glare flips to a wide smile. "I don't wanna rule anything! The King of the Pirates is just the guy with the most freedom in the sea!" he says simply.

Rayleigh stares at him in wonder for a second. "I see," he murmurs.

"I think I'm becoming a really big fan of yours, Monkey," Shakky chuckles.

Rayleigh takes a couple steps towards the door before he pauses and turns back to me. "You don't know what it is, do you kiddo?" he asks. I make a confused hum. "The One Piece," he

clarifies.

I snort and shake my head. “Not a damn clue,” I admit with a smile.

My friends make various sounds of confusion. “Why would Ed know?” Nami is the one who asks.

Rayleigh shrugs. “Oh, Coin didn’t know either, but he knew a hell of a lot because of that place he was from,” he says flippantly.

All heads swivel to me. I eat the rest of my sandwich in one bite.

“What does that mean..?” Usopp asks, eyes darting back and forth from him to me with an eyebrow raised like he’s asking if it’s alright for him to ask. I incline my head to indicate it is.

Rayleigh throws his head back and laughs. “Who knows? All I’ve got about the place is that it’s famous for maple syrup, something called hockey, and being cold as balls!”

I burst out laughing. “Hit the nail on the head!”

“Haki, like the thing from earlier?” Sanji asks confusedly.

“It’s a sport,” me and Rayleigh dismiss at the same time. I look at Rayleigh like he hung the fucking moon. I think I might *cry.*

Rayleigh cackles again and heads for the exit. “Your ship is in Grove 41, yeah? I’ll go take care of that myself and get started on the coating right away. Shakky, why don’t you keep ‘em or send them on their way. You still have a sheet, don’t you?” he calls back.

“I do,” she confirms with a snicker.

“Perfect, I’ll leave it to you,” he hums, then pauses in the doorway. “Kid? You gonna read that letter, or not?” he asks me.

I glance down at my letter, then back to him. “I will,” I confirm.

“This’ll probably take me three days, and I’ll probably work in a different Grove from this one… bah, Shakky’ll explain everything. I’m off!” Rayleigh calls over his shoulder, then shuts the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Is now a good time to mention I don't like hockey? Ik ik I'm a bad Canadian but to be fair I can't skate (I TRIED OK I TRIED SO MANY TIMES TO LEARN BUT I CAN'T DO IT) and I grew up with both my sisters playing ringette (hockey but with a ring and the sticks are straight, it used to be girl hockey but neither sports are gender specific anymore) and being dragged to arenas as an antisocial art kid with undiagnosed ADHD while being the least important child (It was an arc y'all I'm the favourite now). Do you have any idea how many hours I spent sitting in dirty corners with my iPad watching Fairy Tail on crack videos??? ENOUGH FOR MY HATRED TO FESTER, THAT'S HOW MUCH. But also 70% of my personality and humor came from that so I guess in the name of character development we gotta say as the shit fucketh.

Hey did I tell you guys I wrote a POV shift again? That's gonna just be a thing quite a few chapters from here. I promie it's probs not what you're thinking it'll be, but it's very near and dear to my heart ✨

Chapter 109: Chapter One Hundred and Nine: He Needs No Army Where He's Headed

Chapter Summary

Sleep Alone - Two Door Cinema Club

Yeah I immediately have to stop reading because I burst out laughing and nearly knock Chopper off his stool. "Sorry! Sorry, I'll stop moving!" I gasp, settling my hip firmly against the counter and returning to the words.

Chapter Notes

Alright maybe I go on a couple storytelling tangents about Coin in this one. Look. Look. The Rayleigh & Coin dynamic is something that haunts my dreams. They live inside me rent free. You could not comprehend the LEVELS and the DEPTH and the FEELINGS and AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

The man fucking posses me ok????? It's a PROBLEM. Like a 6k future chapter problem. *Literally.*

I've started thinking more about what kinda shit I wanna put in the oneshot fic between this and post-timeskip, which I have tentatively given a much too long name, and I ABSOLUTELY want to do at least one about Coin and his life with the Roger Pirates. Like I got bonked hard over the head with an idea last week and wrote out a thing and *my god,* this fucking guy. Suffice to say it made me weep like a little baby. Anyway y'all have any other shit you'd like to see in the 3D2Y story? I'd love to hear your suggestions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I pick up my letter and stare at it.

"You can read that while I fix you up," Chopper states firmly, hopping up on the stool beside me. I glance over at Hachi in the cot. "He's stable. I need to rewrap your wrists and fix your neck and face. Is there anything else I need to worry about?" he asks.

“I got conked on the head and kicked in the ribs,” I supply, flicking open my pen knife and using it to open the envelope. “Nothing is broken rib wise, I think it’s just bruised. The guy kicked like a little bitch.” Inside is a letter, and a smaller second envelope I resolve to check after. “You’re not gonna peek at my mail, right?” I ask, not taking the letter out.

Chopper scoffs. “I understand privacy, Ed,” he says snootily. “Give me your wrist.” I roll my eyes and hand it over.

“You know, Coin hasn’t been around in a long while,” Shakky mentions, taking my empty plate and replacing it with a drink. “He used to visit all the time, but it slowly petered out over the years, stopping completely something like… 8 or 9 years ago. Or thereabout. It’s a shame, he used to make Ray laugh and laugh… those two were something else,” she murmurs. “That letter was left with Ray the last time he visited. Not that we *knew* it was the last one at the time.”

“He just up and vanished without saying anything?” I ask incredulously. “Did the guy *die?!”*

Shakky just laughs. “No, no, we get a letter from time to time with him assuring he’s alive and well. He’ll send sketches of whatever catches his eye, or a tattoo he’s enjoyed working on. Sometimes we even get souvenirs from the places he visits for clients. But he never promises a visit, and never says where he’s been living, so we see neither hide nor hair of him,” she explains.

I frown. “Seems kinda… sad,” I mumble.

She gives a melancholic sigh, a small fond smile playing on her lips. “I wouldn’t call him that. Rayleigh mentioned a little what a mess he was the eve of Roger’s execution — we don’t know where Coin was when it happened, beyond not present. He’s never said more than that and we’ve never pressed. But sure as sunrise, that next day he was right here making breakfast and helping Rayleigh through the worst hangover of his life,” she recounts, voice warm. “He wasn’t doing terribly well himself, but that’s a man you’ll never find wallowing in regret.”

I look at her for a moment as Chopper starts unwinding bandages from my arm. I take a deep breath, and bite the bullet. I pull the letter out and flip it open. My eyes scan over the words, ignoring the sting of antiseptic in my cuts.

Yo kid,

I got shoved up in this bitch and it wasn't even the Great Pirate Era smh.

Yeah I immediately have to stop reading because I burst out laughing and nearly knock Chopper off his stool. "Sorry! Sorry, I'll stop moving!" I gasp, settling my hip firmly against the counter and returning to the words.

You get the more fun adventure, I'm sure. Anyway I figure you know who I am by now, what with the whole message thing on Skypiea and (hopefully) Crocus giving you my spyglass (low-key waiting for that thing to get given to the wrong person and lost forever because Crocus is Like That). And you've met Rayleigh, who no doubt was unable to shut up about how amazing I am. If he mentioned my fucking title coming from a dick joke, JUST KNOW HE'S LYING.

Moving on. If you are where you are when you are supposed to be, and you haven't drastically changed anything, you know what's coming. There's a lot of shit I'd like to say to you in person — mostly stuff that reeeeaaally shouldn't be written down — but just know whatever you're working towards, that's what I'm good with. We're living in your era, kid. That means fate is in your hands, and I'm not going to sway you one way or the other.

On that note, however, if you're doing the timeskip — and you really should, if you don't have an insane training regiment then I ***will*** *have to force a timeskip on your ass — then I'm your guy. I'm gonna train the* ***shit*** *out of you kid, you're gonna be such a* ***BADASS.*** *Don't worry about the details, no matter where you are or what your plans for this part of the story are, I'll find you when you need me.*

I hope you don't mind, but I've kind of been going around calling you my kid. Pretty much just amongst the crew (and maaaaaaaybe Whitebeard and some of his kids idk I was really drunk around them at some point so there's a non 0 chance I just rambled about you) but they're like… aware of your existence. I mean I know fuck all about you, but yaknow. You're probably something to brag about so I wanted a head start.

God, I don't even know you and I already love you. Is that weird to say? I've been ecstatic to meet you for decades — fuck I just hope you know you'll always have someone in your corner out here. And no matter what — what you're fighting for right now, what your morals are, how shit you think your personality is, any of that bullshit — you couldn't possibly disappoint me.

That second letter in the envelope is for Shakky, give it to her and tell her to open it in case of an emergency. (I have based so much shit off the assumption you stuck with the Strawhats, PLEASE do not prove me wrong on that one oml. I mean make your own choices slay queen pussy boss but like also. Yeah you get it.) The letter is just instructions that'll help me get to you as fast as possible.

Jesus Christ this is getting long. Sorry kid, I'm sure I'll still manage to talk your ear off more in person. Just remember you're everything, everything is going to be fine, and I'm gonna help you anyway I'm capable.

Pick you up later kiddo.

Coin xoxo

I stare down at the letter for a long moment.

"Um… Ed..? Are you… ok?" Chopper asks hesitantly.

I jerk my head up and come to two realizations. One; Chopper finished wrapping up my wrists a while ago and managed to slap a bandage onto my cheek without me realizing it, and two; I'm absolutely crying.

I sniff and wipe my sleeve across my face, laughing even though it's snotty and wet. "Yeah, yeah I'm fine. Fuck, that guy really knows how to hit you in the feelings!"

"He has a talent for that," Shakky hums, passing me a tissue with an understanding smile. I nod to her gratefully and blow my nose.

I guess that'll *maybe* explain why Blackbeard knows about me, even vaguely. But would this motherfucker really be stupid enough to let this shit slip around fucking *Blackbeard?* Coin sounds like the fun kind of idiot, not the 'gives away important shit to THE DEVIL' kind of idiot. Guess I'll have to grill him when we meet?

"Your head isn't bleeding at all, and for once I'm not seeing signs of a concussion," Chopper mumbles.

I finish wiping up my face and give him a smug look. "See? My head's getting thicker!"

"That's not something to be proud of!" Chopper shrieks, hooves flailing like he wants to wack me but refraining. "Let me get a look at your ribs," he orders.

I obediently shuck my flannel off, frowning at a rip in the sleeve. "Are you shitting me? Those assholes ripped my goddamn shirt! How many times must my sentimental items be destroyed?" I moan.

Shakky holds a hand out. "Why don't you give that to me, hun? I'll have it good as new by the time your ship is coated," she offers with a smile.

"Really? Thank you," I say, returning the smile as I pass her the article of clothing. Chopper pokes a couple places around my ribs and I make a face.

"I'm gonna rebind your torso, stop wriggling," he commands.

"Yes sir, Chopper sir," I drawl sarcastically. While he gets on that, I pull the second envelope out. True to the letter, this one has Shakky's name on it in that same elegant handwriting. I hold it out towards her. "This one's for you. He said to open it in case of an emergency," I recite.

She blinks in surprise before taking it with a snicker. “Oh, that man. Always firing on all cylinders.”

“Could you tell me more about him?” I ask eagerly.

Shakky chuckles, lighting up another cigarette. “Where to start..? Well, he’s been gushing about you long before I met him,” she teases.

I give her a helpless smile. “I hope I meet his expectations, I really don’t wanna let him down,” I say honestly.

Shakky laughs again. “You couldn’t possibly,” she denies, waving her cigarette. “That man is enamoured with the very thought of you, the entire time I’ve known him you’ve been one of his favourite topics. You should hear him and Ray go back and forth: ‘My kid wouldn’t treat me like this!’ ‘Oh yeah? Prove it!’ ‘Just because of that I won’t, *prick.’”*

She re-enacts the dialogue with the voices like she’s been practicing for this, and honestly the thought combined with the performance is so funny I really can’t help but burst out laughing.

“Ed,” Chopper admonishes, trying to fasten the bandages around my stomach while it shakes with laughter.

“Sorry,” I apologize, trying to calm myself down to make it easier on him.

“By some *miracle* you actually didn’t break a rib, it’s only superficial bruising,” he begrudgingly admits, shooting me the stink eye when my face starts going smug again. “I gotta clean up your neck, is that alright?” Chopper asks.

“Yeah, go ahead,” I sigh, twisting so my back is to the bar and letting him tilt my chin up so he has clear access, tracing shapes in the ceiling with my eyes.

“So what’s the letter say, little bro?” Franky asks from the booth.

I can’t really turn my head in that direction, but I try to move my eyes as close as possible. “Oh, you know. Stuff,” I say evasively.

“Sidestepper,” Usopp grumbles.

“Nosy bitch,” I retort, then flinch when Chopper starts swiping antiseptic over the scratches I left all over my throat. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” he murmurs.

“No worries,” I dismiss.

“Hold down your shirt collar for me?” he prompts. I do. “I’m gonna wrap your neck up. If it’s too tight or it makes you uncomfortable, let me know.” I hum in acknowledgement. I don’t *love* having my neck wrapped up, but honestly it doesn’t send me into an immediate panic attack so I’ll just suffer through it.

“You’re really not gonna tell us what’s in the letter, though?” Nami asks disappointedly.

I roll my eyes. “Just a bunch of incredibly sweet shit about how amazing I am and how much he wants to meet me and how he’s always gonna be there for me,” I paraphrase flippantly. “And an offer for training, so that’s cool.”

That bit gets some attention. “Wait — you got an offer for *training* from a fucking legend like the *Tailor of Purgatory* and you’re just gonna be *chill about it?!”* Usopp screeches.

“That’s a pretty big offer, Ed,” Sanji says slowly, sounding a little worried.

“Guys like that don’t throw around training all casually,” Franky adds.

“Is that something you want to pursue?” Robin asks, a weird edge to her voice.

“You guys are being weird about this,” I accuse, frowning at the roof.

Chopper taps on my chin to signal he’s done. I tilt my head level and blanch at the tears in his eyes. “Are — are you gonna leave?” he stutters out. I blink owlishly at him.

“Hey!” Zoro snaps from his seat. All eyes snap to him. “If Ed wants to split off from us to get stronger, nobody but the Captain gets a say in whether or not they go,” he states firmly.

I blink wide at him too, then jerk my head around to all of my crew. “Wait — you guys thought I’d just pick up and leave for training with some rando because he’s *famous* while you all continue our journey?” I ask incredulously. When there’s a couple hesitant nods I squawk in offence. “Dude! I’ve got attachment issues and codependent swagger! I’VE GOT FOMO, DAMNIT!”

“What in god’s name is *FOMO?!”* Nami cries, throwing her hands up.

“Fear of missing out!” I cry back with the exact same energy.

“You’d turn down an offer from the Quartermaster of the Roger Pirates because you’d *miss us?!”* Usopp cries, *also* with the same energy.

“Everyone calm down!” Sanji shrieks.

“I don’t know much of anything about this legend we’re talking about, but if Ed wants to go and get stronger, it would be remiss of us to stand in their way,” Brook offers.

“Ed makes their own choices,” Robin says, both defensive and hesitant.

“I’d never stop you from doing what you want, little bro,” Franky hisses through clenched teeth, sniffing violently.

“I’ll support you no matter what you choose,” Chopper wails, also sniffing violently.

“What is happening?!” I beg the middle distance.

“EVERYONE SHUT IT!” Luffy hollers, smacking his hand loudly into the bar. Thank god, it doesn’t snap in two. Also thank god, everyone stops yelling.

The bar rings with silence for a moment before Shakky breaks it. “Well. It seems you all have things to discuss. Camie, would you be a dear and help me get Hatchan situated in the back?” she says calmly, stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray.

“Ah, yes, of course,” Camie stutters from where she’s sitting beside Hachi and his cot while Pappag stares at us all incredulously. Multiple people flush red, probably forgetting they were even present for a moment.

The bar remains silent until Shakky is the last one standing in the door to the back, giving us all an impassive look. “Please try not to break anything,” she asks politely, then closes the door behind her.

There’s another moment of silence.

“You were probably right, Ed,” Luffy breaks it. He’s glaring at the bartop like it tried to shoot a hole in his hat.

“Huh?” most of the crew vocalizes.

“We probably aren't strong enough yet,” he says sourly. Multiple people make unhappy sounds at this but Luffy just shakes his head. “We had no trouble with those Marines today, but we also let Ed and Camie get kidnapped from right under our noses.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. “I feel like that’s a bit of an extenuating circumstance,” I murmur.

“We couldn’t beat Kuma either,” he continues. That has me jolting, and I see Zoro stiffen up out of the corner of my eye as well. “I still don’t know what happened, but I know we didn’t beat him. And how about Aokiji? It wasn’t even *close.”* That one has Robin freezing up.

“So… what’s your point?” Sanji asks stiffly.

“We’re strong,” he starts firmly, “I trust you guys and I trust your abilities. But… but the New World is supposed to be harder than anything we’ve faced so far *as a baseline.* We can’t just be strong, we need to be prepared.”

“If even *Luffy* thinks we need to be prepared, this place really must be no joke,” Nami murmurs into the ensuing silence.

Luffy catches my eye and ever so slightly nods his head. I take my cue.

“The New World is nothing short of a meat grinder for people of our calibre,” I start. All the attention in the bar quickly turns to me. “And it isn’t just the people we’d be facing. Sure, the New World is a hot spot for people who find the worst of Paradise boring, but there’s more than that.”

“What do you mean, more?” Usopp asks, shaking hands tugging on one of his curls.

“The politics, for one,” I scoff. “The New World is home to the Emperors, the strongest of the pirates, and as far as half of them are concerned the only way to survive out there is to ally yourself with one of their crews or die.”

“I’m not working under anyone,” Luffy says stubbornly, scrunching his nose at me when I tilt my head back to look at him.

“Nor would I expect you to,” I reply. “It just means the political climate over there is oversaturated with people who work for big shots and *will* be willing to start shit with us just to goad their Emperors into having a vendetta if we retaliate.”

“But Luffy never gives a shit who someone works for,” Sanji helpfully points out, dawning dread already on his face. “He just punched out a *Celestial Dragon,* he’s got no fucks to give!”

“And honestly, it’s very attractive,” I agree solemnly.

“Ok that’s not what I meant *at all—”*

“What I’m saying is we need to be able to take that heat,” I say matter-of-factly. “If people are gonna start shit with us we need to be able to either brush it off, be intimidating enough no one will even try, or make any of the Emperors and their crews think twice about wanting beef with us for petty shit.”

“You want us to be able to rival an Emperor’s crew?” Chopper asks with barely concealed horror.

I look to the side and grimace. “...I mean that’s *eventually* the goal anyway, right?” I hedge.

“This is not inspiring confidence in me,” Franky deadpans.

“There’s also the *actual* climate of the New World to consider,” I add, swiftly moving away from that one.

“The climate?” Nami asks stiffly, looking queasy already.

I laugh a little nervously. “So you know how the weather here is ass and insane and terrifying and needs special tools to navigate?”

“Don’t you dare,” she hisses, face flashing between white and green.

“Yeah it’s worse over there. New tools, new set of ungodly weather phenomena, just… *worse,”* I explain awkwardly. “It’s just, you know… hell on earth. But! That also means *cool* weather and *cooler* islands!” I tack on with shitty enthusiasm.

“Yay! Cool islands!” Luffy cheers, a refreshing reaction against the blank stares and terror and incredulity.

“Oh my god we’re all gonna die!” Usopp shrieks.

“We’re not gonna die!” I quickly cut in as Chopper and Nami start hyperventilating. “We just need to… toughen up!”

“We have three days until the ship is coated, and the archipelago is crawling with Marines and an Admiral,” Brook points out. “This seems like a sharp curve to clear in such a short amount of time.”

I look back to my Captain. He’s frowning at the bartop, but raises his eyes to meet mine when he feels my gaze. “We need longer than that,” Luffy states, not looking away from me as he says it.

“Then… how much longer?” Robin asks slowly, eyes darting between Luffy and I.

We're still holding eye contact, so I see the same question in his eyes. "That's not something I can decide for us," I say softly, mostly just for him.

Luffy's face turns contemplative, which for him looks like a lovely mix between a frown and constipation, and he drums his fingers on the counter. "I guess it's less about how long we have, and more about how long it takes," he mumbles.

"...Was that kinda super insightful?" Usopp whispers loudly to Nami.

"A little, yeah," she whispers back.

"We have until the ship is coated for you to make a decision," Zoro pipes up. "You can take that time to evaluate how far you think each of us need to go, the smart people can think of a plan to get us somewhere we can train, and Nami can chart us a course there."

"I hate it when mosshead makes plans that make sense," Sanji grouches. "At least he didn't include himself in the smart people category." Zoro scowls at him.

Luffy nods, taking his time to scan across each of the Strawhats, then sighs and slumps dramatically. "Maaaaan, I wanted to go see Fishman Island though!" he whines.

"Fishman Island will still be there when we're stronger," Robin soothes.

"It's not like we can't be productive while we wait, anyway," Franky huffs.

"I wouldn't mind some time to read a couple medical journals," Chopper murmurs, tapping the tips of his hooves together.

"Maybe I'll finally get a good nap in without being interrupted," Zoro mumbles.

“I hope the Marines find you first,” Sanji mutters, but there’s not a lick of heat in his voice.

Dear god, I love these people so much.

Luffy blows out a breath and leans forward with his elbows on the counter, thumbing the brim of his hat. “Ok, we still have three days we need to wait on this island, no matter where we go next.”

“Like I said, the Marines are definitely still looking for us,” Sanji says dejectedly.

“Then we shouldn’t stay here,” Nami says calmly. “I’d hate to cause trouble for Shakky, and Hachi while he’s recovering. Maybe we could just go shopping?”

“You’re being way too laid back,” Usopp blubbers. “We should just dig a hole and hide in it to wait them out.”

“Honestly, our best bet might be to just run wild around the archipelago so they have no way to corner us all,” Franky suggests.

“That’s not a bad idea, splitting up and meeting back at the ship when it’s finished,” Zoro agrees, slouched in his chair.

“You get no say in meeting *anywhere,”* Sanji scoffs with a roll of his eyes.

“Oh, that reminds me,” I blurt, jumping up from my seat and clamouring across the bar — yes I trip and fall a little, but whatever, Luffy helps me up — and knocking on the door Shakky and friends left through.

There's a brief pause before the door swings open, Shakky herself standing there with her cigarette in hand and an eyebrow raised. "Are you done working things out already?" she asks.

"Kinda sorta," I hedge. "Rayleigh said you had something to give us or explain to us though, right?"

She snickers and shoos me away from the door, retaking her place at the bar while I go around the long way back to my spot. She opens up a drawer and withdraws a sheet of paper, placing it on the bartop.

"If you're gonna find Ray in three days, you'll need this," Shakky states, and we all watch the sheet gently drift forward across the polished wood.

"Oh! It's a vivre card!" Nami says in recognition.

"Ah, so you know about them? That saves me an explanation," she hums, tearing the sheet up into equal parts and passing them out. "You really are welcome to stay or drop by though, I don't mind losing a bit of business. Especially with so many Marines in town."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Shakky, but we'd hate to impose," Brook says politely.

"I wouldn't mind another sandwich for the road, though," I add, once again employing my puppy dog eyes to the highest degree.

Shakky laughs, immediately turning to the fridge to see what Luffy could have possibly left behind during his crusade. "Of course, I'll whip something up."

"You're a real actual godsent!" I praise, pumping my arms in the air.

“Can I have a sandwich too?” Luffy asks, stretching his neck up so he can see over Shakky’s shoulder into the fridge.

“You’ve left me a little short on ingredients, Monkey, but I’ll see what I can do,” she chuckles.

“You two are awful,” Nami mutters.

“Monsters, you’ll eat her out of house and home,” Usopp accuses.

“Excuse you, I have a very healthy appetite,” I say defensively. “You think these bulging quads came from nowhere?”

“You don’t *have* bulging quads, Ed,” Chopper deadpans.

“Fine, then my fabulous *ass* had to come from somewhere,” I correct, striking a pose against the bar for emphasis.

Zoro snorts and Robin hides a chuckle behind her hand while Chopper drops his face into his hooves and groans loudly.

“It’s important to have some meat on your bones,” Brook supplies. “Though I wouldn’t know much about that. Yohohoho!”

“Meat?” Luffy mumbles, his arm slowly stretching above Shakky’s head for something on the top shelf while she rummages around in the bottom and pulls out the few surviving sandwich ingredients he missed.

“You’re the absolute *worst,”* Sanji sighs, dropping the butt of his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Monkey, dear, I need that ham if I’m going to make sandwiches,” Shakky says lightly, not looking up as Luffy gets the ham halfway out of the fridge before stopping.

“...I wasn’t doing anything,” he whistles unconvincingly.

“Boooo, Luffy don’t obstruct Shakky’s wizard-like sandwich skills,” I heckle.

Shakky finishes gathering ingredients and turns to the counter to start putting them together, a smile on her face as she does it. “You’re too sweet. Hun, do you think I could get that ham *without* a bite taken out of it?”

Luffy heaves a put-upon sigh and hangs his head. “Alright—”

The door swings open behind us.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for — oh.”

I freeze solid in place. I see Luffy does too.

“Sorry, we’re having a private event right now,” Shakky says calmly. “You’ll have to come back later.”

The British voice of Johnny Yong Bosh sounds like an emptying gun in the sudden silence of the bar. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to intrude.”

I see Luffy slowly turn around, the ham forgotten teetering on the edge of the shelf. His eyes are wide like dinner plates as he takes in the newcomer.

“Sabo?”

Chapter End Notes

Hahahahahahahah. Hey guys.

Gee wonder where that guy has been. This is a callout post for everyone who kept thinking I forgot about Sabo. My man has been busy, OK??? He's had SHIT TO DO.

And what was that??? Conflict resolution and group-conscious decision making????? WILD.

Hopefully this isn't an omen of any kind. Maybe we're getting the Dream Blunt Rotation early..? Haha...

Chapter 110: Chapter One Hundred and Ten: It’s Happening Now And It’s Always Been Like This

Chapter Summary

Always Like This - Bombay Bicycle Club

The rest of his words fizzle out in my head, the whole universe stopping dead in its tracks as a cold hard truth freezes itself solid in my head.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, “I did this.”

Chapter Notes

Slaps roof of Sabo his bad boy can fit so many headcanons in him. AND piercings!

Fine it's 5.4k because I got carried away. Leave me alone, I was riding the high of my own brilliance too hard and girlbossed too close to the sun. Shut up you love it.

College is so fucking expensive I am considering turning to prostitution. Who decided this was ok.

Oh wait right before you go into the chapter you’d better get a couple things handy. Most notably tissues and a pillow to punch or scream into. Um. I love you guys?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luffy is already launching himself across the bar before I turn around.

He grapples around Sabo’s head like a goddamn octopus, leaving only a view of flailing brown gloved hands as he drops his tophat to catch him. Sabo’s black coat swishes around his legs as he takes a step back to brace himself, steel-toed boot heels scuffing on the hardwood floors.

“That’s the other brother, right?” Zoro mutters under his breath, sliding up beside me at the bar. I nod wordlessly, still staring at the pair.

“SABOOOOO!” Luffy cries, looking like he’s trying to strangle the poor guy. I cannot for the life of me understand half the shit coming out of his mouth as he babbles and sobs.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s good to see you, too,” Sabo laughs, muffled from under my Captain.

“How did he understand any of that?” Usopp mumbles incredulously.

Eventually, Luffy pulls back to let his brother breathe and reluctantly climbs back to the floor, one hand still bunched up in Sabo’s coat. “Hi,” he sniffs.

Sabo throws his head back and laughs. “Still a crybaby, are you? You haven’t changed a bit,” he says, sweet and sincerely. “Hi, Luffy.”

“You got taller,” Luffy points out, voice thick.

Sabo grins at him, hands ruffling his hat, then stretching his cheeks before settling on his shoulders. “So did you,” he says, quiet but genuine. *“Thank you,* for staying alive for me to learn that.”

“Aw, that’s nice,” Shakky murmurs behind us.

Luffy’s head suddenly perks up and he spins around, gesturing to us excitedly. “Look! Look at my crew! Aren’t they awesome?!”

Sabo finally turns his attention to the room at large and gives us a beaming smile. “It’s nice to meet you all, thank you for taking care of my little brother,” he says, dipping his head in a short bow. A chorus of dismissals follow him.

I feel bad about it, but the first thing I notice is that he has a very aristocratic nose.

That's immediately offset by the silver septum ring he has, and then I feel worse because that's probably the point. He also has two silver spikes under his lip (snake bites, I think? I can never remember the goofy names for the placements) that match the spikes he has in the cartilage of his ears — two on the left and a solitary one on the right, though the tragus and conch ring kinda evens it out — and the silver studs and black spiral gauges he has in both lobes.

Goddamn, guess when you've got amnesia and a bunch of anarchists surrounding you during your formative years you really don't shy away from the body modification stuff.

"I'm getting the weirdest deja-vu," Sanji mutters, pulling a new cigarette out of his pack and sticking it between his teeth.

Sabo tilts his head, then tosses a lighter over to him. "Sorry, the lighter fluid in that thing is pretty low," he apologizes, ruffling a hand through the wild blond curls at the back of his head.

Sanji just stares at the lighter for a second before burying his face in his hands and groaning. Nami pats him awkwardly on the back.

Luffy has just been staring intently at Sabo's face, and when he notices he reaches out and shoves Luffy's hat lower on his head with a chuckle. Luffy starts pouting, but that's quickly wiped away as Sabo cups his cheek and looks at him with so much fondness it's actually sickening.

"Wait," I blurt, straightening with a furrow in my brow.

All eyes turn to me, and I have to blink at Sabo's because *what the shit?* The right one is fine, wide in the same way Luffy's are, and a soft shade of blue that doesn't feel out of place with his European ass features. It's the left one tripping me up, not because of the burn scar that looks like it's clawing around the eye, but because of the fucking colour. The damn thing looks *fluorescent.*

It's also kinda offset, looking ever so slightly in a different direction than the one staring at me. *Oh,* I realize, *he has a prosthetic.*

…Who the fuck picks a prosethetic that looks like *Sans from Undertale????*

I shake my head trying to get myself back on track. "Aren't you supposed to be with Ace?" I ask, frowning as my heart speeds up in my chest.

Sabo's face drops. "You… you guys haven't seen today's paper?" he asks, slowly turning his head to look across all of us with an unreadable expression.

My heart pivots from racing to solid stone in seconds.

"Ed got kidnapped and Luffy punched a Dragon, we've been kinda busy," Zoro says flatly, drawing himself up tighter as the tension in the room rises.

Sabo blinks twice, turning to Luffy. "You punched a — nevermind, I guess that explains the Marines," he mutters, reaching into his coat and pulling a newspaper out, flicking it open and showing the front page to us all.

I don't even notice I've stood until I'm halfway to Sabo, my entire body numb as I'm stuck in the second the words 'Portgas D. Ace to be Executed' registered, along with a picture of Blackbeard's ugly fucking grinning face.

Oh.

Oh *no.*

The dream wasn't about a scantron, and it wasn't a dream. He said ***option one; worst case scenario.***

"...What..?" Luffy mumbles quietly, face wiped blank.

"I got to Fuga, the island we were supposed to rendezvous on, after the fight. It was left a complete *disaster,"* Sabo starts, letting me take the paper with shaking hands. "Blackbeard apparently had some kind of accord with the Marines, that's why they've been choking up the ocean so bad. I snuck into the Marine camp he dropped him at, but they had already shipped him out to Impel Down by the time I got inside. Blackbeard apparently left for Marie Jois right after he delivered Ace."

No. No no no no *no.*

Oh my god. Oh my god oh my god *oh my GOD OH MY GOD* ***OH MY GOD—***

"I grabbed all of Ace's things, stole Striker, and booked it right here. It's why my lighter is empty, I had to set a bonfire in the damn thing to make it go," he continues, turning to Luffy. "I was hoping to catch you before you made it to the New World. If you're anything like you were, you won't stand by while I try and stop this. I had to make sure you were on the same page."

The paper falls out of my hands, fingers spasming too roughly to catch it. I stare down at the words my brain can't compute.

"How… How did they even find him?!" Luffy demands, sounding nearly as unsteady as I feel. "I thought he was hiding and waiting for you!"

"They tracked his location using an intercepted Transponder call," Sabo explains. "I'm not sure where the signal came from. He's been out of contact with the Whitebeards since I left them, since I always route our calls through the White Snail on Baltigo and I know your crew has one too—"

The rest of his words fizzle out in my head, the whole universe stopping dead in its tracks as a cold hard truth freezes itself solid in my head.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, “I did this.”

Every single iota of noise in the room ceases. Sabo stares at me with a singular intensity in his too-bright eye.

“...What?” Luffy questions, too much fear in his voice for it to be anything other than a plea.

“The call on Thriller Bark,” I say with overwhelming horror, eyes trained on the floor. “I didn’t even think — I was so worried I just used whatever was closest — I — I never thought —”

Another thing strikes me. I whip my head up and stare Luffy right in the eyes.

“The static,” I breathe out.

That’s when the cotton in my own brain takes its cue and drowns everything out as all my friend’s voices start overlapping.

Snippets of conversation from all the way back before Little Garden, back before I had the luxury of a White Transponder — to Kaya, to Zeff, to Genzo and Nojiko — all of them swim through my mind, wrapped in the tell-tale hint of static from the Marine listening in.

My hands somehow manage to find my wallet in the pockets of my shorts, the sounds of my loose change rolling across the ground somehow making it through the cacophony. The smell of fucking *smoked fish* hits my nose as I slide the half-burnt scrap of paper out before my wallet is joining the newspaper and change on the floor.

Half his Transponder number is gone, I think from somewhere far, far away. *I have that memorized, right?*

Somewhere in that distant place I realize I've dropped to my knees.

More people are speaking around me, but all I can see is the paper that represents Ace's entire life in between my fingers. Crumpled from how tight I'm holding it. And *burning.* Burning because *I led them right to him.*

I know I'm breathing too fast.

I know the tears I can hear sizzling on the paper aren't going to put it out.

I know I can't save him like this.

I know — oh.

I can't save him. I can't save him, *I can't save him I CAN'T SAVE HIM* ***I CAN'T SAVE HIM*** ***—***

A hand clamps onto my shoulder.

I whip my head up to meet Luffy's eyes. There's roiling seas and an ocean of fear in those eyes. "I did this." I whisper, my voice cracking at the edges.

Luffy firmly shakes his head. "You couldn't have known," he disagrees.

"But I should have!" I argue, face twisting up. "It's my *job* to know!"

“Ed—” he tries interrupting.

“No!” I cut him off, desperation twinging through me like a snapping guitar string. “I — after all that high and mighty *bullshit* about being careful and — and leaving this fuck alone, it — it’s still my *fault—”* my words break off in a harsh sob.

Luffy uses the hand on my shoulder to shake me. “Shut up!” he demands, face set in a stubborn frown. “You convinced Ace to ask for help! You got him to run from a fight for the first time *ever* without even being there! You did everything you could!”

“But it still wasn’t enough!” I cry out, my forehead bashing into his as I jolt forward.

“SO WHAT?!” he yells, pushing back. “Is it my fault for not doing anything too, then?! Is it Sabo’s for not getting there fast enough?! How about every single other person who watched you call him?! No! Because that’s just the way things happened! Ace isn’t *just your* responsibility!”

“I made the call,” I weep. “I asked where he was. I may as well have handed him over on a silver platter—”

Both of Luffy’s hands zip into my hair and he pulls our faces close until our noses are mushed together. “Ace will forgive you,” he states, voice solid steel with an unwavering certainty that feels like cold water down my back.

“Why—”

“You know how I know?” he asks, eye to eye with me and holding my gaze unblinkingly. “Because *I* forgive you.”

It's like a slap to the face. I try to jerk back, but Luffy's hands in my hair are keeping me in place. "How can you *say that?"* I croak, trying to find any hint of dissension in his expression.

"How can you not believe it?" he counters.

...Ah.

I sniff, reaching my left hand up to wipe under my nose while the other keeps a firm hold of Ace's vivre card. "Sorry," I mumble pathetically.

"I forgive you," Luffy repeats.

"A stupid decision, really," I snort wetly.

"Not really, but you're used to those anyway," he says dismissively.

"I think you should be more upset," I mutter, smearing tears across my face with the back of my wrist.

"I've heard your opinion, and I'm deciding to ignore it," he announces simply.

I choke out a laugh, letting him take the hand with the burning paper, clasping it between our palms as he eases his head back. He pulls me up to my feet while I scrub my eyes with my arm. "Fucking hell, one more panic attack today and I'm calling the fucking ref over 'cause this shit is *rigged."*

How the actual fucking Christ has today been the worst day of my life when I've honest to god died before? I have been *punted through buildings,* and this is worse. HOW DOES THAT HAPPEN?

“Today sucked,” Luffy says emphatically, voicing my thoughts.

“Sorry for kinda taking up all the breakdown space. How are you feeling? You ok?” I ask worriedly, touching his cheek.

Luffy frowns and looks at the ground for a moment before his jaw sets and he meets my gaze. “I’m ok. I’ll be better once we get Ace back and beat up everyone who gets in our way,” he says firmly. “You’re good?”

“I’m good. I’ll be better once we burn those motherfuckers to the ground,” I confirm.

“Ace promised me he wouldn’t die *ever,* so he’s gonna be fine until we do that,” he states matter-of-factly.

I make a soggy laugh. “Sorry. I should know better, especially with promises to you.”

There’s a light cough behind us. We both turn to Sabo as he politely clears his throat behind a gloved hand. “I’m really sorry to interrupt.”

We both blink twice before Luffy loosely gestures to me (I idly realize he hasn’t let go of my hand yet). “This is Ed,” he introduces.

“I’m Ed,” I repeat, raising the other hand.

Sabo nods, reaching back and rummaging through his bag, which I hadn’t noticed earlier. “I thought so. I have something for you, it was with Ace’s stuff but there was a note addressed to an Ed so…”

And he pulls out a hat. A yellow cowboy hat with a brown hatband and a lighter yellow sunflower radiating out across the brim, which has an open cutout hole at the front. I didn't think actual hats *had* those, I thought that was an art thing. There's also a string with a golden bead threaded under the sweatband. Sabo holds out a folded piece of paper as well, and I accept it with a tremulous hand.

I unfold the note slowly, Luffy lightly taking the hat with his free hand and holding it for me gently. I suck in a sharp breath, hold it in, and read.

Ed,

Cowboy hat to match me, yellow to match Luffy, and a sunflower because they're your favourite. How'd I do? ;)

With your stupid green hair you basically make a whole flower, or at the very least you can hide your atrociously overgrown roots. I'm giving you this in person so feel free to try and fight me for that comment, just know I'll put you on your ass. I'd also accept a hug, as long as you don't call me greasy again.

With love, Ace

Luffy delicately places the hat on my head. Slowly, with reverent fingers, I refold the note.

Yeah alright fine, so I start crying again. I tug the brim of the hat down over my face with a groan of pain. "Two minutes," I announce, holding up the appropriate amount of fingers. "Give me two minutes, then I'm good."

So I stand there. For two minutes. Making these weird wheezy noises and just. Crying. The dead silence and awkward shuffling got really old after the first thirty seconds, so I have to tell them to talk amongst themselves. No one but Luffy and Shakky seem to want to.

“Alright, I’m good,” I proclaim two minutes later, tapping my hat brim up and once again smearing tears all across my bandaged arm. That’s just something I’m gonna have to live with. “Sorry for the dramatics, I am ready to commit to the bit now.”

“I put myself in a coma coming out of amnesia, I get no say on anybody’s dramatics,” Sabo dismisses, waving a hand.

I snap and give him a finger gun. “My man.”

“So you’re, ah, the First Mate, right?” Sabo says with an awkward smile sitting lopsided on his face.

He’s pointedly looking just to the side of me, which is all well and great except his fucking prosthetic somehow manages to be staring right into my soul, and I laugh with the same amount of awkwardness. “Yeeeeah. Bit of a shit way to meet an in-law, but hi.”

Sabo blinks twice, slowly, smile frozen on his face. “Haha. What?”

“Aw man, I wanted to tell Ace first,” Luffy complains.

“We really need to hammer out a plan,” I announce, turning back to the bar and looking to Shakky. “I don’t suppose you have a big sheet of paper around, or something?”

Shakky taps her lip a couple times and hums. “I’ve got parchment paper, you can just unroll it further if you need more space,” she proposes, pulling a roll of it out from one of the bar cabinets.

“Wait can I get some clarification real quick?” Sabo asks helplessly as Luffy and I stride up to the bar, me taking the pencil Shakky offers with a smile.

“Alright here comes the plan you shits. No one ask me any stupid questions — stupid questions include asking me how I know something, if I’m sure about something, or if I have a death wish,” I instruct, brandishing the pencil like a weapon as the other Strawhats close in around the bartop and the roll of parchment paper.

“We already know you have a death wish,” Zoro drawls pointedly.

“No? No clarification? Ok, sure, alright,” Sabo mutters to himself.

“I propose a two pronged attack,” I start, tilting my head towards Sabo as he files in on Luffy’s other side. “Maybe three. Maybe more than that. I propose a multi pronged attack.”

“Like a fork,” Luffy says sagely.

“I propose a fork attack,” I correct myself imperiously. “As you said, Ace is already in Impel Down. Since that place is locked up tighter than a nun’s hooch, let’s focus our attention on what we can assume is the main battlefield.”

“Marineford,” Sabo infers, both of us ignoring the choking sounds from Sanji.

“Correct,” I nod. “Whitebeard probably already has his eyes set there, positioning his fleet and all the allies he’s gathering around it. I’m assuming you can get in contact and convince them of whatever this plan turns into, for the record,” I say, raising an eyebrow at Sabo.

“I’ll manage,” he says simply.

“I fucking *love* competent people,” I whisper to the ceiling. “I’d suggest keeping an eye on those allies, by the way. I wouldn’t put it past the Marines to try pitting them against each other with one thing or another.”

“I’m sure I can keep an eye out for any turncoats,” Sabo hums lightly.

Goddamnit *all* these brothers are men after my own heart. I shake my head and spin my pencil. “Ok, so Marineford. It’s highly defensible, and will have all the Marines’ best lined up and waiting. They’ve got a bay, which will absolutely have traps, and I dearly hope they’re bright enough to evacuate the civilians living on base.”

“I made a couple calls on the way here, they’ve already started evacuating,” Sabo confirms.

I LOVE COMPETENT PEOPLE.

“If I’m not being a fucking moron, I believe it’s *roughly* set up like this,” I mumble, sketching out by best approximation of the island (which is appropriately awful, given I’m using my left hand), and tapping a specific spot. “And this is their dazzling showpiece.”

“Execution platform?” Zoro says with oncoming dread.

“Execution platform,” I affirm.

“How do you know where — right, stupid question, sorry,” Nami mutters, putting her hands up at everyone’s looks.

“Anyway,” I say, giving her a pointed stare before going back to pointing to things on the shitty little map. “Our best bet is to get Ace before he’s in the scaffolding. Once he’s up there, our chances of failure go so through the roof it’ll be like — wait, I can’t make that joke.”

Tell me why my ass was about to say it’ll be like we’re fighting Kaido on Onigashima. I can’t make jokes about One Piece when I’m in One Piece. Oh god, failure had made me stupid.

“Moving on. There’s two games we can play, with pros and cons to each,” I offer. “We can go super stealthy and try and pull something off without tipping the entire fucking Marine force off to what it is, or we can utilize their whole parade to turn this back on them and send a

message or whatever. Stealth will require absolutely 0 mistakes, so nigh impossible, but turning the tables will mean we're fighting about 12x as hard."

"Is it just me or do both of those sound awful?" Usopp hisses under his breath.

"How can we turn the tables?" Robin asks, materializing a hand from the table to adjust the paper so she can see it better.

"They're making a spectacle of it," I state, sweeping my eyes across my crew. "They're making his execution a rallying force for the Marines. Sound familiar?"

Looks of realization and understanding sweep across my friends. "Like the King of the Pirates' execution," Sanji vocalizes.

Both Sabo and Luffy ever so slightly tense, and I turn to them directly. "When I say spectacle, I mean *spectacle.* They're pulling out all the stops, and that means they won't pull any punches."

"So they know?" Luffy asks.

"Given this level of presentation, we have to assume so," I confirm. "Using Ace solidifies a couple things for them. They aren't *just* using this to antagonize Whitebeard. The Great Pirate Era started with Gol D. Roger's execution," I start.

"And they plan to end it with the execution of his son," Sabo finishes quietly.

There's a moment's pause before the bar reacts to that little tidbit of information. "Hey wait sorry WHAT?!" Usopp shrieks.

"Uh. Hey uh. Is. Is that a joke? Is. Is that a weird metaphor?" Franky stutters out.

“That — no. Just… no…” Chopper utters dismally. “Science… no…”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, isn’t Ace, uh — kinda *way too fucking young for that?”* Nami wheezes.

“The math is not mathing,” Zoro mutters, massaging his temples.

I exchange looks with both Luffy and Sabo and the three of us just kinda… shrug and make noises. “I mean… I never bothered questioning that part..?” Sabo says slowly.

“Wait…” Luffy mumbles, counting off on his fingers, realizing we’re still sharing a hand and trying to count those fingers, then losing count and having to restart on the other hand before ultimately giving up. “I dunno. But he is, so I guess it makes sense somehow.”

“It happened so it happens,” I offer unhelpfully. “I mean… ‘you’re an elf. You live in a realm,’ and all that.”

“What the everloving *fuck* did you just say?” Nami groans loudly.

“Weirder shit happens around us every day, weird babies *cannot* be where you draw the line!” I rephrase with big sweeping hand gestures, tugging Luffy along with them. “Chopper is a talking reindeer! *Babies can be weird!”*

“Anyway, so stealth or being a huge pain in the ass for the government,” Sabo interrupts, leaning in with a sparkly blue gel pen he got from who knows where and doing little corrections to my shitty layout. “You said stealth would require 0 mistakes, how confident are you about the odds of that?”

“When I tell you less than 0.0000001, I am overestimating the abilities of every single person involved,” I deadpan.

“Alright so full-scale media hellstorm it is,” he concurs.

“Glad we’re on the same page. The plan will move in phases,” I decide. “We run each phase near simultaneously, think of it like a series of floodgates. Phase one; Impel Down.” I roll the parchment paper out a little further and draw a shitty little icon of the place — really more akin to a scraggly rook than anything.

“I thought you said it was too high security,” Sanji says with a frown.

“I said it was locked up tighter than a nun’s hooch,” I correct, mostly just to watch his cheeks turn pink. “That means there’s always a possibility if you’re willing to get a little freaky. Or if you’ve got access to the messiah,” I say proudly, gesturing to Luffy.

“I don’t like what this is implying,” Sanji grumbles. “The subtext is not it.”

“The subtext is *irrelevant,* and we’re gonna start with phase two,” I say imperiously, drawing a big hole and smoking ruins middling above the other structures, making a triangle of my quick sketches and drawing a counterclockwise rotation-arrow-thing in the middle. “Enies Lobby, Marineford and Impel Down are all connected by the Tub Current, controlled by the Gates of Justice.”

“Fuckin’ Gates of Justice,” Franky mutters.

“Yup, fuckin’ Gates. They’ll be transporting Ace through here because it’s both the fastest possible route, but it’s also the most secure. Nothing gets in or out that current unless a Gate is opened for them, and for most people that’s a death sentence,” I explain.

“For most people,” Brook repeats. “But then there *are* some who can escape this purgatorial stretch of water?”

“Well we just so happened to have reduced an island with one of those Gates to smoking fucking rubble, and I just so happen to have the number of someone who might be able to procure an Eternal Pose for said island, which it just so happens will be either unmanned or lightly guarded because they blew it up themselves like idiots,” I say sweetly.

There’s a hot second of silence at that revelation, broken by Sabo throwing his head back and cackling.

“Domino, you are something else,” Shakky chuckles, watching the proceedings with wide excited eyes and her cigarette unlit and forgotten between her fingers.

“Now the actual plan of phase two!” I cheer. “We have a way in and out of the current, if someone can be there to man the Gate, but it’s still a one-way street. From Enies Lobby you can get straight to Impel Down, but it’s the next stretch of water that’s the goal. That’s where the transport will be, and that’s where Ace is the most grabable.”

“What’s the catch?” Nami asks trepidatiously.

“The Tub current is like the Calm Belt, in that it’s full of huge fuck-off Sea Kings,” I say matter-of-factly despite the moans of despair that follow the statement. “Marines ships have Seastone lined hulls that can avoid their detection underwater, but as soon as they peek their heads up it’s curtains. There is, of course, another way to sail through waters like those.”

“Conqueror’s Haki,” Sabo recognizes.

“Yes, but given the only two dudes *available* and unlikely to kill us on sight who can use it consistently enough for that shit are Whitebeard and Rayleigh, it’s kinda moot,” I say flippantly. Usopp slams his face into the bar. “So it’s stealing a ship, having your own, or getting really fucking lucky and running like hell.”

“I’ll make some calls,” Sabo says nonchalantly, tearing an empty corner off the paper and scribbling something before tucking it away.

I press my fist to my mouth and exhale harshly through my nose. *"I love competent people,"* I weep before getting back in the zone. "Alright that transport's gonna have like — probably minimum 5 ships and accompanying Vice-Admirals, Onigumo for sure being one of them. So that might really suck for whoever gets that phase."

"Noted," he hums lightly. I LOVE THIS GUY.

"Phase three is simple; it's just fighting through the entirety of Marineford's infantry and the blockade of ships surrounding the entire perimeter and all three Admirals and probably all the Warlords. But I mean, it could be worse," I say brightly.

"How could that possibly be worse," Usopp wheezes.

"I dunno. Probably could, though," I shrug. Usopp collapses to the floor. "Anyway, like I said the bay will be full of traps — there's some kinda big metal walls that come up from the water, I think — and if I had to hazard a guess they'll use one of their two natural disasters disguised as Marines to either freeze it or Pompeii everyone's asses early on. Or both, they might get zesty."

"So the bay isn't a good idea?" Robin murmurs with a furrow in her brow.

"It's unfortunately the best option," I admit. "It'll be the closest to the scaffolding a ship can get, at least. I'd suggest having people with good mobility — flying and such — coming in from the sides and back and through the city part anyway. But yaknow, it's easier to minimize a trap's damage when you know about them beforehand. And they're a hell of a lot easier to avoid entirely when they're sabotaged."

"I like the way you think," Sabo chuckles, smile just a touch too wide and eyes just a bit too bright. Fucking cryptid lookin' motherfucker.

"You got Revs inside already?" I ask with a curious tilt of my head.

“Maybe. I plan to do that part myself once I leave here,” he reveals, tracing the edge of his scar with the end of his pen.

A couple people start. “Wait, Revs? Like the Revolutionary Army?” Nami squeaks out.

I slowly look across my crew then back to Sabo. I give him a ‘floor’s yours’ gesture and he shrugs. “My bad, forgot to mention. I’m the Chief of Staff for the Revolutionary Army,” he drops all casual-like.

“Anyway I’ve got a guy — two, actually — inside Marineford, I can give you his number,” I offer over my friend’s screams. “He’s pretty new to the base, but he knows a couple secret passageways and shit that may help you move around. With how tight security is going to be I wouldn’t put huge stock in it, but they can give you an ID code and unit numbers enough to play yourself off as a Marine. I’ve pulled it off, but given we were on a pretty isolated train with one of the few Marines I respect, that’s not saying fucktons.”

“Where are you *finding* these people…” Nami and Usopp weep together.

“Oh, we’re gonna get along *great,”* Sabo giggles, grinning like the devil.

I beam wickedly back, tearing my own chunk of paper off to write Jonah’s number. “Only call this with a secure line, and tell him I gave you the number. If he’s iffy about it just tell him I said he still owes me for clobbering that green Brooklyn-accented rooster for him.” After a second of thought, I add Iceberg’s under it with the words ‘Enies Lobby Eternal Pose’. “You might as well call him too. You’ll get his secretary — just say you’re doing a favour for me, who needs a favour from him.”

Sabo takes it with a wink. “Thank you kindly, I’ll use these responsibly.”

“You better,” I joke.

“So from Marineford the quickest escape route would be taking the Tub back to Enies Lobby. We’ll hope to get Ace out in as few pieces as possible,” Sabo states solemnly, “but like, if we gotta make it a couple and leave his hands behind, I’ve heard hooks can be very fashionable.”

Ok I’ve *gotta* fucking cackle at that, because what the fuck?

“Are we going to talk about phase one now?” Zoro asks in an annoyed tone, but I can see the fear in his eyes as he looks between Sabo and I. Good, he *should* be afraid of this dynamic.

“Phase one is getting Ace out of Impel Down before any of this other shit ever happens,” I announce, snickering at the groans and looks heavenward.

“Of course part one of your plan is to make the rest of the plan obsolete,” Brook chuckles.

I then give my undivided attention to Luffy. “Sneaking in that bitch and fighting our way down and back up will be on us. Whaddya say, Captain? Wanna do a prison break with me?” I ask with a smirk, holding our clasped hands up.

Luffy smiles like tectonic plates colliding. Like the Titanic and the iceberg, like meteorites intersecting, like a fucking atom bomb going off. He smiles like a car crash, like crashing a car, like a physical force so profound your skull smashes open on the concrete—

“Unquestionably.”

Chapter End Notes

Um. So don’t be mad.

My hobbies include ruining lives and breaking my own damn heart. But also be so fr gang this was always gonna happen.

Anyway here's art of Sabo because I couldn't help myself, and this fucking drawing which I love very much ok, and I'm putting it here as the hat ref because it HAS the hat and will probably make you very upset after what you just read. No don't think too hard about how this may never be canon you're too sexy nooooooo—

But! Good news!!! My birthday is tomorrow!!!!! The bad news is I will be spending it in a crisis about reaching my 20's. I did not think I would live this long, which is terribly sad when I think about it. BUT I AM SO GET FUCKED WORLD AHAHHAHAHAHHA—

Chapter 111: Chapter One Hundred and Eleven: Nothing's New

Chapter Summary

> *Nothing's New - Rio Romeo*
>
> We move out as a group, my hand still clasped in my Captain's and the crew at our backs, but only one of us knowing exactly what we're walking into.

Chapter Notes

> Y'all ready for 5.5k of straight gas? This baby is gonna start rolling and not stop until it's flattening Sisyphus at the bottom of the hill.
>
> Pray.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I need to get moving as soon as I can, I have a lot of ground to cover and a lot of people to call," Sabo says, looking apologetic.

I use me and Luffy's still connected hands to wave him off. "We understand. And we'll see you when this is all over, hm?" I say lightly. "I'm expecting an intense ass shovel talk from you and your brother when we aren't in the midst of a crisis."

"Oh good, so you're aware of that," he says pleasantly, which makes it all the more intimidating.

"What if we didn't do that, actually," Luffy butts in, somewhere between snark and a pout.

I suddenly remember something and straighten up, shoving my free hand in my pocket and rummaging around while praying to god I was neurotic enough to pack this fucking thing when I left the ship this morning.

Oh my god I *was* that neurotic. Grabbing random shit for the *win.*

"I've got a gift for you!" I proclaim brightly, holding the stupid thick little black book out to him. He blinks and takes it, an eyebrow arched in question. "I stole that out the safe of the Director of CP9 a bit before I blew his fucking brains out," I explain easily. "It's coded or whatever, but I figure you'll have fun with that."

Sabo stares at it for a second before giving me intense eye contact. "You know what you're doing, and you're doing it well."

I shrug with a smile. "It's a talent."

He reaches out for a handshake and I meet it, perfectly aware of what those fucking things can do even before he squeezes just a little too tight. "I am still going to threaten the shit out of you later," he promises sweetly.

I don't let my expression slip for a second. "Don't disappoint me, I'm looking forward to it."

Sabo's slightly manic and challenging smile completely transforms as he pivots to Luffy, turning sweet and gooey and fond beyond all belief. "I'll see you when we've got Ace back, then we can all have some sake together, ok?"

"Ok," Luffy responds, giving him the same kind of stupid smile back. "Bet I'll save him first, though."

Sabo cracks a laugh as he moves in closer, tipping Luffy's hat back and taking his face in both hands before pressing a long lingering kiss to his forehead. A lick of jealousy takes me off guard, and I fight it down with every inch of my willpower.

Fine, maybe I wish I had that with my sister, whatever.

“You can certainly try,” he says warmly, chuckling as he picks up his bag and heads for the door. “Bet I’m still stronger though, so you just try and keep up, little brother.”

“Wait, take this for your travels,” Shakky calls, tossing a lighter across the bar.

Sabo catches it deftly and blinks at it confusedly for a moment before he’s back to smiling, settling his tophat back on with one last laugh. “Thank you! I’ll catch you later Luffy, that’s a promise!” he calls over his shoulder, then he’s gone.

Luffy sniffs for a second after the door shuts, then takes a deep breath that puffs out his chest, and turns back to our makeshift drawing table. “Ok. So we’re breaking into prison, right?”

“Yup,” I confirm, squeezing his hand.

He squeezes it back. “And we just gotta go down then back up?”

“Damn straight.”

“No worries then, this’ll be simple.”

“You two are idiots!” Nami shrieks, shaking her fist as Shakky laughs. “Impel Down is the most secure prison in the world! No one *ever* escapes from there!”

“Betcha no one had successfully stormed the Judicial Island before we did, either,” I say nonchalantly. “Nams, we kinda do the impossible as an enrichment activity. Plus that guy Shiki did it, we’re better than fuckin’ *Shiki.”*

“This is a fair amount of unstealthy people for a stealth operation, though,” Robin sighs, contemplatively thumbing her lip.

I freeze for barely a second before I'm waving my hand. "Eh, it's Luffy. Stealth was never gonna be a long-term factor," I brush off.

"We're winging it. Oh sweet god we're winging it," Usopp mutters to the ceiling, eyes wide open like he's hoping said god will come down and tell him this is all a bad dream.

I… fuck.

I've been talking like we'll be doing this as a crew the whole time. I've said 'we' and listened to their comments and laughed at their incredulity. But…

"We're gonna have to put off the ship coating, I guess," Sanji hums.

"If my discount isn't still waiting when this is over, your ass is grass," Nami growls. "And can I *at least* have a heading so I can chart a course?! We can't just sail without a destination!"

"If we can even get off the archipelago," Franky adds pessimistically, but he's also grinning like he can't wait to see if the Sunny can take it.

"Just thinking about all those Marines makes my skin crawl. Or it would if I had any, yohohoho!" Brook laughs.

"This is terrible. So very terrible," Chopper moans into his hooves.

Zoro steps away from the bar and crouches down, scooping up my wallet, all the change I dropped, and the newspaper from the floor. He rolls the paper up and chucks it at the empty booth, drops my change into the wallet, then holds both that and another stack of bills out to me.

“We’ll manage. We’ve broken out of jails and shit before, we’ve got this,” he says self assuredly. “Don’t suppose I can win that 13,000 berri back when I’m right, eh?”

I stare at the cash for a moment before taking it. “As if, sucker’s bets are your thing,” I say automatically.

…The crew will not be coming on this one. When we leave this bar they will all be sent off by Kuma, and they’ll get the training they damn well need. Maybe it’s selfish, to want to keep these people safe over a miniscule increase in the probability of success.

It’ll just be me and Luffy on this one. I’d sooner take a dip in the Tub Current of my own volition than abandon my Captain and Ace to the fucking mess I made around them. Here’s hoping Coin is willing to commit to that ‘I’ll find you when you need me’ thing with a *significant* amount of pizzazz.

Well, guess I’m putting my money where my mouth is. On Long Ring Long Land I said I was selfish as fuck, time to fucking prove it.

I adjust my hat (and that is gonna take a while to get used to, isn’t it?) and tear the chunk of parchment with me and Sabo’s writing on it off from the rest of the roll, folding it up and sticking it in my pocket. “It’s about time we start moving, too. Our carriage awaits.”

Shakky takes the parchment roll and tears off two sheets, wrapping the sandwiches she’s just been fucking making this whole time in them and placing them on the bar. “For the road,” she says with an understanding smile, eyeing us with a pride that makes me duck my head. “Life will always throw curveballs at you. You have a good plan, but remember to be flexible.”

Luffy snatches his sandwich with his free hand and, after a moment of consideration, sticks it in his pocket. I take my own at a slower pace, squirreling it away in my pocket too.

I pause for a second, then separate Luffy and I’s hands. Ace’s vivre card is still there in my palm, smoldering at the edges and pressed flat from the past minutes of pressure. I take a

deep breath (IT STILL SMELLS LIKE SMOKED FISH) then remove my hat, sliding the little piece of paper into the sweatband and replacing it atop my head.

“Thank you for everything, Shakky,” I say sincerely. “Watch for us in the news, won’t you?”

Shakky laughs, resting her elbows on the bar. “Of course. Be careful out there, and good luck.”

Luffy reclaims my hand and we exchange a look. I take one more deep breath and let him lead us to the door. “Bye lady, thank you! Tell Hachi and Camie and Pappag we say bye, but we’ll see them later!” he calls over his shoulder.

“Make sure Hachi gets lots of rest!” Chopper adds. A chorus of other goodbyes and such follow as the people themselves follow us out.

The fresh air outside is another shock to the system, and I squint at the change of lighting.

“We’re off, then!” Luffy announces, starting off down the stairs.

We move out as a group, my hand still clasped in my Captain’s and the crew at our backs, but only one of us knowing exactly what we’re walking into.

———

“—well Ed would have to call whoever to get the Pose if we went to Enies Lobby, so it wouldn't matter anyway,” Usopp states.

“Sailing out of here without a proper direction is stupid. What if we accidentally end up going the complete opposite direction and don’t find out until we’re too late?!” Nami snaps back.

“It’s pretty optimistic to think we’ll be choosing the direction we take out of here,” Robin hums.

“Maybe we’ll end up sailing right into Marineford by accident,” Franky cracks with a laugh.

“That’s not even funny,” Chopper squeaks with a scowl.

“There’s really nothing to be done—”

“What the hell?!” Luffy interrupts Sanji, stopping dead in his tracks. “What’s *he* doing here?!”

Me and Luffy’s hands are wrenched apart as mine grabs my gun and his clenches into a fist. We’re all on guard in seconds, weapons drawn and moved into defensible positions before we even register what the threat is.

My heart stops dead in my chest for a moment just on instinct. “Why the hell is Bartholomew Kuma on this island?!” Nami yells, Clima-Tact shaking in her hands.

“HOLY SHIT!” Usopp screams.

He towers over all of us, sliding a glove off his hand and turning the palm — which has a strange metal cylinder in the centre — forward.

“Don’t let that hit you! It’s a shockwave!” Sanji shouts.

It’s not a shockwave. We scatter as light flashes out of the metal, impacting where Luffy had been standing a second ago and sending him flying from the blast. We all skid back where we landed, crouched low as smoke fills the area.

“That wasn’t a shockwave!” Luffy yells in outrage.

“That was..!” Chopper gasps.

Him and Luffy both turn to each other with stars in their eyes. “A BEAM!”

“You’re gonna be impressed straight to your grave!” Usopp hollers.

“Not him again!” Robin huffs, sweat beading down her temple.

“Son of a *bitch!”* Zoro hisses, face twisting up as his hands clench on two swords.

My entire body aches just looking at him, but still. “That isn’t Kuma!” I inform. “This is a whole different monster!”

“What?!” Usopp shrieks, turning to look at me incredulously. “Chopper said you weren’t concussed!”

“I’m not!” I yell indignantly. “Fucking *look at him!* Motherfucker has no paws and just *shot a beam at us!”*

“Ok, fair, but then why does he look exactly like him?!” Sanji asks, eyes darting between me, Zoro and Kuma like a pinball machine.

“Whoever it is, he needs to fuck off!” Franky announces, folding his hands together into a Coup De Vent and blasting him in the chest with the air cannon. He slams back into a tree, but gets up perfectly fine.

Luffy crouches down and steam starts to billow from his body as he goes into Gear 2. “Alright! Either way he’s strong, so let’s go all out from the start!” he rallies.

I’ve got two jobs right now; mitigate as much damage as I can, and hold out until the real Kuma arrives. With that in mind, I throw myself into the charge the same as all of my crewmates.

Luffy reaches him first, lunging out with his fist cocked back and only narrowly managing to twist out of the way as the Pacifista — fuck it, might as well call it like it is — opens its mouth and shoots a fucking beam out of its face.

It really doesn’t get better from there.

_____

I’m gonna let you in on a teenie tiny secret about fighting a big mean robot that can shoot lasers at you; IT FUCKING SUCKS.

“OH WHAT THE *FUCK?!”* Usopp screams at the top of his lungs, tackling me behind a root as the motherfucker turns its hands on us. Brook and Franky duck behind the same one as light rains from behind, casting shadows over us.

“That is *so* not Cash Money,” I moan, fully upside down from the way Usopp tackled me and not loving that at all.

“What Ed said,” Brook whines, his tall tophat pulled down flat to fit behind the root.

“You have no idea *what* Ed said,” Franky accuses, on his hands and knees with his head twisted to preserve the pompadour.

“Do you think we can play dead?” Usopp whimpers, peaking around the root before his eyes widen and he’s screaming again. “OHMYGOD—”

The root kinda blows up a little. We all go sprawling out in different directions, me rolling into a somersault and twisting myself to get a visual as I fire my gun without any attempt at aim, simply turning the bullet for a direct hit on his face.

“Man are you *shitting* me?!” I yell as it does fuck all except draw his attention to me, forcing me to dive away from another goddamn beam.

The monster trio go rushing in right as I slam headfirst into a building I Did Not See, so I Do Not See them attack the Pacifista, but I do hear the loudass explosion as whatever the fuck they did manages to get it in the fucking dirt.

“Um, Ed? Did you roll into the building on… purpose?” Robin asks, appearing at my side to help me up as I rub my forehead.

“Uh. Yes,” I say slowly, absolutely lying. “It was… a diversion?” She just stares at me for a long moment. “They definitely hit him because he was distracted trying to figure out what I was doing,” I bargain. She continues to stare.

“This really is a whole different guy,” Zoro scoffs from where he, Sanji and Luffy are standing, scuffed up and out of breath.

“You think he has a twin?” Luffy asks, resettling his hat.

“Maybe..? Who knows, maybe he can make clones of himself,” Sanji mutters.

“That implies there’s more than this one, which sounds like a huge problem,” Zoro huffs.

Then the Pacifista is back up, and everyone is back to fighting and screaming. Fighting this thing is fucking brutal; no matter how hard and what we hit it with it just gets back up, and I'm seriously feeling everything that has happened to my body in the past week or whatever coming back with a vengeance.

After Zoro gets swiped with a backhand that sends him smashing into me and the two of us rolling across the ground with unfortunately similar sounds of pain, I'm ready to admit I overestimated how easy mitigation and holding out would be.

"Holy fuck," I groan, tapping weakly at Zoro's shoulder and trying to get my head to stop spinning. "Oh good god. I dunno if my head is still on straight."

Zoro makes a wheezy-raspy noise through gritted teeth, half splayed on top of me and just barely rolling his head so he can look at me. "'S as straight as you can get," he breathes around a cough.

"Are you guys ok?!" I hear Luffy shout over.

"Luffy, keep your head in the game! Our priority is the big guy!" Sanji redirects.

"I'm low-key super scared of this guy," I squeeze out around a hack. "Are you scared of this guy?"

"You be scared for both of us, I'll do the ass kicking. Can you remove your knee from my spleen?" Zoro wheezes, trying to roll off me and failing miserably.

"If you get your hand off my tit I'll get right on that," I mumble, patting around the ground for my pistol. "Be honest, how bad is it for you? I kinda feel like my nervous system is eating me."

"My bad," Zoro mutters, moving his hand. "This isn't anything I can't handle. Uh — totally unrelated — can you maybe get me upright, which is something I can definitely do myself,

but since you're here…"

"I got you," I huff, taking the easy way out and just wrapping an arm around his back and turning us both until we're back on our feet. We both nearly collapse again when the strain of gravity returns, but I refuse on principle to let my knees buckle and Zoro is Zoro, so we stay up.

"Alright, back to it," he groans, returning his sword to his mouth and rolling his shoulders until he looks settled back into his own skin.

I watch the crew all take their shot at the Pacifista; Chopper trying to punch him, Franky trying to punch him, Brook trying to stab him, Usopp shooting him, just all the shit. "Hey Zoro, I've got a weird idea," I start.

He side-eyes me but nods a bit. "Yeah?"

"How do you feel about a really dumb combo move?" I ask while Robin slams the mouth of the Pacifista shut as it tries to shoot a laser at Nami, making it detonate in its own mouth before Nami's hitting it with lightning from her Clima-Tact.

"Sounds good," he agrees, scowling as it starts shooting out indiscriminate blasts and tying his bandana around his head with a sharp yank. "I'm gonna use Asura, can you work with that?"

"Of course I can," I respond with a grin, shoving my pistols in their holsters so I have free use of my hands.

"Oi cook! Pass him here!" Zoro hollers, dropping into a stance as Sanji goes running for the Paficista with his leg alight.

"Stubborn fucking—" Sanji grunts as he kicks the big fucking nuisance hard in the chest, sending him hurtling at us.

I turn to Zoro as two arms become six, grabbing a pair by the forearms and giving one of his three heads a messy smile. I spin through three steps and hurl him with a guttural yell towards the Pacifista like a shot-put, setting his whole body from the waist up to spin as he plows into the Kuma look-alike like a fucking blender right outta the pits of hell.

"HERE I GO!" Luffy hollers from high above us, crashing down towards the bloody and teetering Pacifista with a giant Gear 3 fist.

"Get his ass!" I shout as my other friends yell support as well.

The Pacifista stares up at him and opens its mouth with a laser charged up and ready before Luffy's massive fist rams into him like a speeding train, shattering the ground and burying the son of a bitch in it.

I drop down to my knees, thoroughly exhausted despite knowing this is only the first phase of the nightmare. I swipe my hand down my shirt, frowning at the rips over my cleavage from a jagged rock. That feels very fanservicey, despite not making it through the bandages underneath, but whatever. Luffy, tiny, drops down to the ground and the rest of my crew are also taking knees and moments to catch their breaths.

"That… that stopped the stupid bastard, *huff* right..?" Franky calls from the other side of its body. "Fucking *cyborgs."*

"Fuckin' better of!" Usopp groans, fully laid out on his back.

"He looks like he'll just get up and start moving any second though… it's creepy," Nami mutters between puffs of breath.

"If he does, just tell him… tell him I'm already dead," Usopp requests, his head flopping back into the rubble.

“Maybe… maybe we should just… run? Run for it?” Chopper suggests. I can’t even see him over the mound of the Pacifista.

“Hey guys,” I wheeze, lazily sweeping my eyes across the canopy as my friends make groans of acknowledgement. “We’re not done. There’s a… oh sweet *god,* *huff* there’s a dude.”

“Noooooooo!” Usopp moans pathetically.

“Where?” Zoro demands, already struggling to his feet while using his swords to prop himself up, eyes darting around the clearing.

“You guys got some real nerve, look what you’ve done!” a rough voice berates from above.

“God, why?!” Brook cries, throwing skeletal hands up. “One guy was enough!”

“Wait, up there!” Chopper shrieks as two shapes come crashing down to our level.

“Who is that?!” Luffy yells, arm over his face from the detritus they kicked up with their landing.

“What an utter disgrace, PX-4!” the voice growls. “It costs as much as an entire warship to make just one of you Pacifistas! How exactly am I gonna explain this to old Doc Punk?!” As the smoke clears it reveals yet another *fucking* Pacifista and a large man with a black bob cut, a scar arcing from his left eye to his mouth, dressed in a red apron thing and holding a large double-headed battleaxe over his shoulder.

“OH MY GOD THERE’S ANOTHER WARLORD!” Chopper, Brook and Usopp all scream.

“Warlord or not, we don’t have the stamina to fight another one of these things!” Sanji grits out.

“Did he just say Pacifista..?” Robin questions.

“Didn’t look like much of a pacifist to me,” Nami huffs. “Is that the guy’s name?”

“I think it’s more about *pacifying* than pacifism,” I grunt, shifting in a vain attempt to make my body stop hurting.

“Just who the hell are you, broadaxe?!” Franky demands.

“I have an identity outside of my axe, you know,” he says petulantly. “And there’s no point in asking questions! I have nothing to say to you! I’m the most well-guarded and tightlipped man alive!”

“You could at least tell us your name!” Usopp yells, sounds downright petty.

“Like I said! I’m Sentomaru, the guy with the tightest mouth in the world,” Sentomatu says matter-of-factly.

“...So you’re Sentomaru,” Usopp repeats, perfectly polite.

“Uh — To be clear I told you that because I wanted to, not because you asked,” Sentomaru quickly backtracks. “Now get ‘em, PX-1!”

Yeah and then we’re back to dodging FUCKING BEAMS from the thing’s STUPID HANDS.

“We can’t keep doing this,” I pant, nearly toppling into Luffy when we both lunge the same direction. “I’m reaching my fuckin’ limit and we don’t have *time.”*

Luffy looks at me for a moment as Zoro and Sanji repeat similar sentiments. “Yeah… Alright! We’re running!” he announces. Everyone looks to him with wide eyes. “But not all together, we need to split up!”

“SOUNDS GOOD! RUUUUUUN!” Chopper and Usopp screech, both immediately sprinting away as the Pacifista shoots off another blast.

“The three of us should go different directions!” Luffy says to Zoro and Sanji.

“Got it,” Sanji responds, then turns to Zoro. “You gonna be alright alone?”

“Shaddup!” Zoro snaps.

“I’LL PROTECT NAMI EVEN IF I DIE!” Sanji proclaims, running after her with Franky close behind.

“Zoro protect me with your life PLEASE!” Usopp screams, latching onto his back with Brook joining that group.

Luffy’s hand latches onto my arm and then we’re moving. “You guys are with me! Ed, c’mon!” he shouts, Robin and Chopper joining us as we make a break for it the opposite direction as the other two groups. “Rhonda-vous at the Sunny soon as you can!” he hollers at the top of his lungs. “But like — also zig-zag or something!”

“Evasive maneuvers!” I cry. “Serpentine! SERPENTINE!”

There’s a blast of white at our backs as Usopp sends off a smokescreen to obscure our retreat however he can. There’s also a pebble in my shoe I’m not thrilled about running with, but what the fuck can you do.

There's an explosion the direction Sanji's group went and Luffy's head swings back to look even as he keeps running. "He went that way, are they alright?!"

Sentomaru's broadaxe slams into the ground in front of us seconds before the man himself. "This is no time for you to be worrying about others!" he declares. " I don't have anything against you pirates, but a job is a job—"

Luffy goes right for him with a flurry of blows. Sentomaru thrusts both of his hands forward, and Luffy is rebuffed so completely he goes flying. "What the hell?!" he yelps from the air.

"What was that?!" Chopper gasps.

"Your offense is good, but I've got the best defense in the world!" Sentomaru yells, pivoting to Luffy as he falls and driving his palm forward with a force that shoots him into a building and reduces it to ruins.

"Luffy!" Robin and I shout.

"Why does this guy have to be strong too?!" Chopper wails.

"Just so you know, I don't have powers," Sentomaru states.

"What's up with this guy's moves?" Luffy groans from the rubble.

There's another explosion from the direction of Zoro's group, and the sounds of Usopp screaming his name. It's the quality of the explosion that has my stomach threatening to upchuck from anxiety, however.

"Fucking *shit,* that's Kizaru," I heave, pushing the brim of my hat up so I can see. "Shit. SHIT! HEY! ADMIRAL!" I scream over at where I can see the group now, the root that had been between us obliterated by the explosion.

“WHAAAAAAAAAT?!” Brook screams back.

“So damn late, Uncle Kizaru,” Sentomaru grumbles.

“Times up… 120,000,000 berri bounty, Pirate Hunter Zoro…” Kizaru drawls, a lazy quality to his speech that harkens way too close to our last Admiral encounter as he raises a long leg above Zoro, prone and bleeding on the ground, with light shining from his sole. “Taken down with one hit… you must have already been worn out.”

Adam Sandler? What are you doing here? And in a bright yellow pinstripe suit sounding stoned out of his damn mind, too.

“ZORO!” Luffy shouts, trying to lunge out of the rubble. “He’s gonna die! USOPP! DO SOMETHING!”

Small problem with that; Kizaru is a Logia. No matter what Usopp tries to sink into his chest, or where Brook stabs him, it just phases right through.

“Zoro! Run!” Chopper keens, fully crying.

Robin slams her arms into a cross, making more arms sprout from the ground and start rolling Zoro out from under the Admiral’s foot. It doesn’t help much, since Kizaru just streaks forward in a flash of light until he’s planting a foot in Zoro’s back with the other still raised and glowing. “No use… you’re far beyond help,” he drones. “You’re going to die now.”

“ZORO!” I scream. I can’t shake the guilty feeling that I put him there. The light somehow gets even brighter and—

Rayleigh comes in out of nowhere, kicking Kizaru's leg up and redirecting his shot off into the trees.

"Some time to come out of hiding… Dark King Rayleigh," Kizaru intones.

"Don't go picking these young buds before they sprout, this is just the start of their era!" Rayleigh smirks back.

"Old guy!" Luffy cries out. I nearly sob in relief. The words exchanged between the two powerhouses are nothing but buzzes in my ears as me and Luffy's eyes meet, and without words I know exactly what he wants.

"Fuck this pen-pineapple bastard," I mutter breathlessly, throwing myself forward to close some distance, hopeful that'll ease the strain of this a little. I plant one foot forward and latch my powers into the ground, turning with so much force at once I have to drag my arms through the air to get it moving. "GO!" I roar, head pulsing at the distance my abilities are stretching as I rotate all three of my crewmates out of the middle of the fight with the very dirt under their feet.

Usopp and Brook both stumble, not prepared to move so fast without warning, but Zoro is near unresponsive and facedown so he does fuck all.

"EVERYONE JUST RUN! RIGHT NOW WE CAN'T BEAT THESE GUYS, WE'RE TOO WEAK!" Luffy screams at the top of his lungs.

We comply.

I see Usopp and Brook grab Zoro, and Franky set off an attack that removes the Pacifista as a problem first, but I'm already booking it to my Captain, yanking him over the ruins and breaking straight into a dead sprint.

"Thank you, Rayleigh!" we both yell, not even looking over our shoulders.

“Sure thing! I’m praying for your safety!” he calls back.

Sentomaru is right on our tail, but Luffy sees the explosion in the distance from the Pacifista and the distraction is enough for him to catch up. “You don’t have time to worry about others!” he yells again. “I didn’t even get to use my battleaxe!”

I yank Luffy down by the arm and spin in place, the unexpected cold stop letting me slip under Sentomaru’s guard and make contact with him. “I’m really sorry about this!” I grit out, because this is horribly unethical, but I don’t have time to be sportsman-like right now.

I set his stomach to spin, and slam a piece of my consciousness into the turn to keep it going like I did with Oars.

Sentomaru immediately goes green in the face. “What—” is all he manages to choke out before he loses his composure.

I’ve already gone back into a full tilt run, letting Luffy drag me the right direction as my eyes cross from the strain of holding the control on top of the already repetitive use I’ve had to put my powers through today.

My vision aligns just enough to see Sanji take a beam right through the chest and fall to the ground with a violent spray of blood, and Usopp to be shot straight through the shoulder. He drops Zoro as he collapses back in an arc of red, and Zoro sprawls limply on the grass.

I falter, because how the *fuck* can I not? The split second of blind terror costs me my concentration, and my grip on my powers slip.

“How dare you—” I hear Sentomaru gag wetly behind me, but then I see Chopper leave Robin’s side with three Rumble Balls in hand.

"QUIT IT!" he screams, the sound twisting into an unearthly howl as he goes full cryptid at our backs. We both twist to stare in horror at the towering fucking monstrosity Chopper resorted to as he raises a giant hand and swipes.

Robin is suddenly at our side, pushing the both of us as Chopper starts swinging indiscriminately. "Look out!" she hisses with wide eyes. "We need to—"

My hair stands on end. Everything goes silent.

"ANOTHER ONE?!" Usopp and Brook scream.

"It's Kuma," I whisper, entire body pulsing with the relentless memory of pain.

"It's a shame to see you again, Roronoa," he says in his soft monotone.

"Shame to… see you too…" Zoro returns, breathless but honest as he struggles to his feet.

"If you were to take a trip, where would you like to go..?" Kuma questions, slowly removing his gloves. His arm sweeps forward and—

Zoro is *gone.*

"Z — Zoro?" Usopp chokes out. "Zoro?! *ZORO?!"*

My hearing goes offline.

You asked for this. You brought them to this. You can't regret it.

Luffy and Robin are still tugging and pushing me whatever direction, there's definitely yelling from all sides, the Pacifista is gone already, things are happening all around me but—

I'm jostled and thrown to the ground, and suddenly Robin isn't there anymore. She got flung by berserk Chopper, shoved me and Luffy out of the way. My knees are smeared in dirt, I don't think I could get up off them if I tried—

Luffy is shaking me now, yelling in my ear and begging and demanding and there's some anger, yes, but there's also—

I make eye contact with the Warlord. It's strange to call it that, with the state of his eyes and everything, but that's what it is. Kuma and I just regard each other across the battlefield, and I see, I *feel,* the resignation—

I convey a single thing; *hit me as hard as you fucking can.*

Acknowledgement. My hearing comes back online. He starts moving.

I swing around to my Captain and latch both hands onto his shoulders. "Wait for me!" I order, digging my nails into his skin.

Luffy looks confused and startled by my words. "What—"

I cut him off by shaking him. "I'll find you! So *wait for me!"* I demand, panic edging into my voice as Kuma closes it.

I shove Luffy with all the strength in my body, arms spasming and dropping my weight as soon as he's out of reach. I can feel Kuma's presence looming heavy over my head as I keep my eyes locked on Luffy's horrified own.

“I’ll find you! I promise I’ll *always* find you!” I shout hoarsely, fingers scraping mercilessly into the dirt. “Every step of the way! I *promised!”*

“ED!” my Captain screams out, half lunging towards me with an arm outstretched.

I reach back.

Then, with his choked off and unreservedly anguished scream ringing through my ears, I’m gone.

Chapter End Notes

Well. I'd like to apologize for this arc being a nightmare from start to finish. I'd like to apologize again, because I make no promises it'll get better anytime soon. But be for fucking real, tell me you didn't read the title and know damn fucking well how this shindig was gonna end. You can lie to yourself all you like but you damn well better not lie to me.

If it helps next chapter is going to be a Wednesday update? (I'm a little scared y'all would start a witch hunt for me if I made you wait the full week 😅)

Chapter 112: Chapter One Hundred and Twelve: I’m All Out Of Hope

Chapter Summary

Eyes Without a Face - Billy Idol

My head tilts back as far as it can, and I get a wonderful eyeful of the ocean as I rocket over it at breakneck speeds. “Oh sweet *fuck!”* I scream, mostly out of frustration rather than fear.

Chapter Notes

Heeeeeey guys. You aren't too mad about last chapter, yeah? Good, good. Anyway guess who chopped off all their hair in a fit of rage again.

I'm doing what the homies call fudging travel times for the greater good, you'll understand when you're older.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’m walking through a jungle, which is a little odd.

That’s a weird way to start this. But to be fair, this whole fucking thing is weird. It’s been weird for a damn long while, to be honest.

I’m sweating my ass off, bangs plastered to my forehead and shirt clinging to my back, but it’s not like I have much of a choice. It’s times like this I genuinely consider just shaving all my damn hair off — fuck any repercussions or flashbacks it brings.

I slap my hand onto my neck as another fucking mosquito tries it’s luck, squashing the fucker before it gets a chance. It’s the fourth one in half the minutes, so I say fuck it and swing my cape back over my piled up hair to cover the sweat slick skin, despite the fact it’ll be too hot to handle in a few minutes and I’ll have to remove it again.

I duck under a low hanging vine and nearly trip over a catch in the grass. Curse these stupid fucking heeled boots, curse the stupid fucking sharp rocks that mean I can't just walk barefoot, curse the whole stupid fucking journey.

This goddamn jungle has been a nightmare start to finish, but it's not like I can just give up now. After the stunt I pulled to get out here, going back empty handed simply isn't an option. God — I can already imagine the concern and the condescension, the 'I told you so,' the scrutiny, the smugness hidden behind the worry-filled voice of—

There's a noise somewhere up ahead. I stop in my tracks for a moment, hand darting to my hip. Something big is moving around, a tree creaks under an unknown weight and foliage rustles, the insects fall silent and the birds cease their calls.

I let a smile curl up my cheeks. "Found you, you son of a bitch," I whisper under my breath.

My cape slips off my head and I drop into a crouch to start carefully picking my way forward, avoiding twigs and dead vegetation with a deftness that only comes out during battle or when the situation calls for it.

The sounds are getting quieter but nearer as I get closer and closer, I can almost taste my victory, hear the cheers and the collective sounds of relief from hundreds upon hundreds of people, feel the applause, the acceptance, see the pride and the look of 'I knew you could do it all along,' the respect on the face of—

There's a large tree dead ahead, and I can see the very edge of a lanky arm behind it. My smile turns vicious and my hand clamps into a vice around my weapon. I'm probably only going to have one shot at this, so I need to make it count. I need to strike once, strike fast, and strike ***hard.***

My anticipation builds with every silent step, with every blink of my eyelids, with every short breath in and quick exhale out. Fifteen feet, then ten, then five, then creeping towards the tree without a single hint of noise.

Three feet, then two, then my weapon above my head and a foot propelling me forward for a life-ending blow to my target. "Sorry, monkey, I need that wish!" I holler, striking down as I twist around the tree, except my target isn't the giant monkey I was expecting but a—

The shock completely blows my concentration to shreds. My strike misses and embeds itself in the wood of the tree, right beside the head of the—

That isn't a monkey. That's a ***boy.***

_____

I gasp awake with the night sky in my eyes and the wind rushing through my hair. I try to sit up but can't, I try to roll over but can't, the most my limbs will do is twitch and the panic that rips through me is *crushing* for a moment, but then—

Kuma.

My head tilts back as far as it can, and I get a wonderful eyeful of the ocean as I rocket over it at breakneck speeds. "Oh sweet *fuck!"* I scream, mostly out of frustration rather than fear.

I'm still in the air, headed on a straight shot to wherever Kuma saw fit to send me. I twist my head back up to try and locate the moon or some shit, and peg the time at… fucking hell I don't know, probably some time past midnight?

I'm in a fair bit of pain, and by a fair bit I mean a fuckton, but taking a second to assess my body doesn't tell me much about whether that observation was true. For all I know I could have been out for more than a day.

Damnit Sanji was right, I should have started carrying a watch when he told me to. Now he's gonna go off and find some super expensive one just because I was inconvenienced—

Oh.

Oh wait.

No he won't.

I lose the night to unrelenting sobs and an unending stream of screaming and crying, then lose the morning to the exhaustion induced nap that follows in its wake.

_____

When I awake in the afternoon, cried out and still exhausted, I do not feel a single inch better than before.

It's really fucking bright, and I really wish I could swing my hat from where it's trapped at my back by the string around my neck over my eyes, but I can't. The most I can do is close my eyes, or keep my neck in a stupid position to stare at the ocean.

It's in the midst of watching a herd of Sea Kings in the distant water, my neck cramping from said position, that things start coming back to me.

It starts with Zoro, as many things do, standing fearlessly in opposition despite barely being able to maintain his balance. It's Zoro standing between us and a threat like he always does, and then it's not.

It's Brook, jumping in front of danger without preamble, without anything but an earnest desire to comfort the people at his back. It's Brook with his arms spread and a joke half finished, and then it's not.

It's Usopp, not hesitating for a second before firing his weapon, unhesitant to draw attention or make openings. It's Usopp panicking his ass off and yelling for help but doing it anyway,

and then it's not.

It's Sanji, recklessly throwing himself at an enemy over and over, giving his all to protection or retaliation regardless of the price he pays. It's Sanji running straight and unheeding at the problem, and then it's not.

It's Chopper, completely lost to the world as he indiscriminately attacks, giving up the erudition that makes him *Chopper* just to protect us. It's Chopper, who I hope to god doesn't remember this when he's back to normal.

But then it's Robin pushing me and Luffy out of the way — it's her protecting us at all costs while Chopper isn't in control of himself, it's her being smacked clear across the battleground, it's her yelling at us to keep running anyway.

But then it's Franky and Nami immediately going after Robin — it's Franky using the body he put together piece by painstaking piece with his own hands to catch her before she hits the ground, it's Nami using her intelligence and unparalleled understanding of weather to soften her landing.

But then it's knees in the dirt, yelling and begging and demanding, it's anger and resignation, it's eye contact and resignation, it's a plea more *fucking* ***resignation—***

But it's assent. It's Kuma turning away from my friends. It's Kuma coming our direction as fast and unyielding as a moving vehicle. It's my friends with a few extra seconds to make sure Robin is ok.

It ends with me and Luffy, as many things do, with hands and promises and a heavy dose of desperation and reaching *reaching* ***reaching—***

I suppose it doesn't end as most things do, actually.

For the first time in a very long time, I am well and truly alone. This isn't another end of a battleground, not an empty room in a ship, not the other side of an island. This is stranded solitary in the air, headed to a destination unknown.

Fuck, I forgot just how much I hate silence.

Fuck.

Ok, so maybe I lose another hour in the air to crying. Fucking sue me.

_____

It's around what I assume is really late afternoon or early evening that I get it together enough to start thinking practically.

No matter where I land, it stands that I need to get to Amazon Lily as fast as I possibly can. I asked Luffy to wait, but he won't sit still for long. Waiting for me in the original canon situation would be one thing, but waiting when he knows Ace is in danger is a whole different beast.

He arrives on Amazon Lily the day after he's sent flying, so he's probably already on the island. I mean, if I actually *did* sleep through multiple days, then I'm kinda fucked regardless. Whatever the case, given that I'm still FUCKING FLYING, wherever Kuma picked is even further than the Island of Women. If his bitchass took 'hard as you can' as *'far'* as opposed to *'fast'* I am going to SCREAM.

So that isn't overwhelmingly wonderful, but as long as I suddenly and miraculously develop god-like rowing skills it should be… fine.

…Oh good god, I'm screwed aren't I?

I mean, there's always the chance Coin really *will* pull through with the pizzazzy ass pickup, but I'm not holding my breath for that.

My fucking nose is itchy, but I can't fucking move my arms enough to reach it and I have never been more irritated with someone's powerset before.

———

I'm in the middle of making some half-cooked half-shit plans for Impel Down that will lead absolutely nowhere, and so engrossed in my own stupidity and (what I'm suddenly realizing are *ass)* planning skills, that I don't even fucking notice I'm falling at first.

In my defense, I have been rocketing through air for way too fucking long. And I'm stupid. So it's UNDERSTANDABLE that I did not notice the direction the wind was blowing or whatever.

So. It takes me a moment, but I do realize I am now hurtling downwards. I panic, obviously, but I *reeeeally* don't have much range of motion and I don't *think* Kuma would intentionally throw me into the ocean — and let's be so for real; if it's in the drink I go, it's in the drink I stay.

"Please please *please* be somewhere with experimental jet ski technology," I hiss into empty air before I slam into the ground.

I mean, kinda.

There's an explosion of force around me, and the air pressure that's been restricting my body for-fucking-ever finally lets up, but that has the really fun side effect of all the airforce that hit the ground recoiling into me and throwing my back into a harsh arch before I finally — *finally* — touch ground.

“Dirt!” I half wail half wheeze, smacking hands into it and painfully twisting to kiss it like I just disembarked from my first international flight.

I mean… I kinda did, but whatever.

There’s the distinct sound of someone dropping something and I look up, twisting my twinging neck again. I seem to be right on the outskirts of a town, which is a little fucking odd considering where I know everyone else lands, and almost dead in front of some kind of alley.

That’s where the noise came from; there’s a kid — teenager? — standing there with one hand raised like it was holding something and the other clutching a black duffle bag, and on the ground rolling away from him is a can of spray paint. He’s also staring at me in unabashed horror, which is nice.

I open my mouth to say hi or ask where the fuck I am, and the tween(?) drops his bag, screams, and sprints away from me as fast as he can.

I stare after him for a long moment before shrugging. “Fuckin’ alright,” I mutter, getting my shaking arms under me and pushing myself slowly up out of the paw-shaped imprint in the dirt. Once I’m on my feet (which is a fucking *task,* let me tell you), I jump out of the hole and shuffle into the alley.

I snatch the can off the floor, an eye searing shade of orange, and start idly shaking it while looking around the alley. There’s a variety of graffiti splayed out across the walls — words I can’t read for the life of me, big bubble letters, names and a variety of dick drawings. You gotta appreciate the universal constant of drawing dicks on things, I guess?

I look down at the can, then at the empty space with a single orange spot where the kid had started working before I arrived. I shrug again. “When in Rome, or whatever this place is,” I murmur, then yank the cap off the can.

With the orange can and another plain black one I snatch from the bag tucked in my pockets, I trot out of the alley leaving the words ED WUZ HERE at my back.

The town itself isn't anything intensely special, as I look around it seems like almost any other place we'd have stopped to restock at along our journey. There's a tall mountain range I can see in the distance, and a forest taking up a large portion of the middle ground. There's also the fuckoff castle basically looming over everything, and I don't know how to feel about that.

I'm walking slowly (only current speed) down the road (only current path) until I reach some kinda river (only current river). I'm halfway across the bridge that arcs over it when my vision starts going weird.

My head has been quietly tapping a drum solo the entire time I've been walking, but as I move across the cobblestone the tapping becomes *pummeling.* Everything goes fuzzy, and every nerve ending on my body starts sending signals to my brain too fast to process, and everything starts *tilting*—

Oh, turns out that's just me. Falling over, that is.

"Oh my gosh, are you alright?!" a high pitched feminine voice cries, before small hands are grabbing onto my arm as I stumble into the stone rail of the bridge.

I make a weird punched-out noise, one hand snapping to grab the rail and the other slapping over my eyes. I swear to FUCK if I'm concussed again Kuma is GETTING IT no matter HOW GREAT HE IS.

My stomach starts doing some complicated acrobatics and I'm feeling some *odd shit,* but my vision stabilizes and I look up to see who grabbed me. A young girl with shoulder length blonde hair under a white bandana blinks big blue eyes at me worriedly.

"Hi. Sorry. Gimme a moment," I groan, gently brushing her hands off so I can heave myself over the side of the bridge just in time for those two sandwiches I had at Shakky's to leave my stomach and find a home in the river.

Owie.

I just kinda hang there for a bit, feeling very sorry for myself.

“Um, what… are you doing..?” the girl asks hesitantly from behind me.

“I dunno, I’m just fuckin’ tossing bikes in the river, bro,” I maffle, face in the stone.

“...What?” she questions, somehow more hesitant than before.

I (slowly) right myself and turn to her with a smile, pulling my hat back on my head and wiping my mouth on my arm. “Hi. Sorry. I’m ok.”

She looks doubtful of that, hands wringing in her long patterned skirt. “Are you sure? You’re pretty beat up, and uh… maybe concussed, based on what you just said,” she mumbles.

I look down at myself. I mean… she’s not wrong? I’m kinda super dirty, and really fucking bruised. “Yeah… this is kinda my standard, to be honest,” I say with a shrug.

That seems to worry her more. “I can take you to a doctor here in town, it’d be no trouble,” she assures.

I grimace and look down at my gloved hands. My eyes catch on my ring and I clench them into fists. “I’m sorry, I think I’m a little short on time for a checkup,” I mutter with a sigh.

“Even just to… replace your bandages?” she offers tentatively.

I pause, looking at my arm which is covered in dirt, tears and now the remains of vomit, and grimace harder. “Ok maybe some new bandages,” I concede.

Her entire face lights up. “Really?! Oh, I’ll help you there, can you walk? You can lean on me if you need to!” she rambles, reaching behind herself to grab a canister of some sort she had been carrying but I guess dropped ro catch me.

I chuckle and shake my head, pushing off the rail and taking a deep breath. “Don’t worry about that, short stack. Lead the way?”

She nods rapidly, snagging me by the hand with her free one and taking off in a jaunt the way I was headed. I look about the town as she basically drags me through it, blue rubber boots smacking on the road. “Dr. Kurotsuru’s a nice guy, you’ll be in good hands,” she says brightly.

“Dr. Kurotsuru?” I hum idly, reading off signs and such. It seems to be near dinner time, I think, probably 5-6 in the evening.

“Yeah, though most people around here call him Dr. Black Beard,” she replies.

I stop walking and she jerks to a stop too from still holding my hand. She glances back at me with a question in her eyes. “What did you say your name was, short stack?” I ask slowly, taking a closer look at the girl in front of me. I realize what she’s carrying is a milk canister.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I never introduced myself,” she gasps. “I’m Moda!”

I blink twice. “Oh my god, you’re Moda!” I exclaim, jaw dropping as I swing my head around to look at everything in a new light. “Holy shit, am I in *Lulusia?!”*

Are you *shitting me,* that is SO GODDAMN *FAR.* HOW THE FUCK AM I SUPPOSED TO MAKE DECENT TIME TO AMAZON LILY FROM HERE?!

“Er — yes?” she responds, blinking rapidly at me.

I suddenly realize how weird I must look. “Sorry, I’m Ed. I’m a friend of Ace’s, he told me about you,” I explain, turning in a slow circle to take everything in. “You saved him from drowning in a river?”

Moda gasps again. “Oh! Yes, he delivered a letter for me! You’re a friend of his?”

I nod, returning my focus to her. “Yeah I am, and I *really* need a boat because he’s in a *lot* of trouble and I need to get to him *fast,”* I say adamantly.

She nods her head rapidly. “Of course! But, uh, we’re still gonna get you those bandages,” she adds assertively. I stare at her for a long second. She visibly struggles against my blank look and squeezes my hand. “Um. Please?”

I heave a sigh. “Yeah fine.” She whoops and starts tugging me once again down the street. “Just so you know, I’m pretty sure this is the doctor Ace kicked in the face,” I add.

Her steps falter, but she keeps going. “Then maybe we won’t mention him,” she laughs nervously. She comes to a stop outside a building with a cross shaped sign over the door and knocks twice before swinging it open. “Doctor! Do you have a minute?” she calls.

There’s a clatter from through a doorway with a curtain across it, then a portly man with a beard and curly black hair peeking out from under a hat pokes his head through. “Hello? Oh *yikes,* you look terrible,” he blurts.

“Thanks, I’m having the worst week of my life,” I deadpan. “Could I get some bandages? I don’t really have time for the whole kit and caboodle.”

He blinks and rakes an unimpressed look over my everything. “Yeah, I’m sure you don’t,” he mutters, disappearing back behind the curtain before reemerging with a roll in hand. “Sit down, I’ll bind you back up,” he orders.

I hesitate. “I’m kinda in a rush—”

“Sit your ass down and get treated,” he says sternly. I sit my ass down and hold out my grody left arm. “What the hell is this?” he asks incredulously as he unwraps my old shit and reveals the scar I got from Sphynica.

I scowl and cross my right arm over my chest. “Souvenir,” I grumble.

“Hell of a souvenir, just who have you been fighting?” he titters, tugging the old bandage out from under the stuff wrapping my shoulders and chest area. Thank god Chopper sectioned this shit, I am *not* in the mood to get shirtless in front of this guy.

“Why’d you assume it’s from fighting?” I ask snootily.

“Don’t take me for a fool, I’ve seen your poster,” he shoots back flatly, swiping antiseptic over the scratches and shit I got from being cuffed. “You’re one of them Strawhats, the Detective.”

“Gonna wrap me up all pretty then give me to the Marines as a present?” I ask sweetly, batting my eyes at him.

The doctor scoffs. “I haven’t the strength nor the patience. At least that scar of yours is healing up nicely, whoever treated it did an excellent job,” he huffs.

My expression sobers out as I stare at the scar while he covers it with new bandages. “Yeah, he did,” I mumble despondently.

He gives me a weird look, but finishes securing the bandages without comment. “You gonna let me take a look at the rest of this?” he asks, gesturing to my everything.

I shake my head. “Nah, I really gotta get going. Thank you, but I’m on a deadline and someone’s waiting for me.”

The doctor heaves a sigh, takes what’s left of the bandage roll and puts it in my hand along with a packet of antiseptic wipes, closing my fingers around them with a heavy pat. “If you insist. Can I get you any kind of painkiller before you go?”

I chuckle and shake my head again. “Don’t bother, lemme just stick this sandwich in my gullet and I’ll be ‘aight,” I say brightly, brandishing the sandwich Shakky gave me before I left.

The doctor stares at me blankly and Moda stifles a chuckle by the door.

“Ok maybe an ibuprofen or twelve,” I amend. He rolls his eyes, but reaches into the pocket of his coat and produces a bottle, slapping that into my hand as well. After a short moment of consideration, he passes me a second roll of bandages as well. I stick it all in my pocket, then produce the stack of bills Zoro gave me, dropping it onto the table beside us before getting to my feet. “Thanks again, see ya.”

His eyes widen and his eyebrows shoot up. “Hah?! That’s way too much money for some bandages and painkillers!” he yelps.

I just bounce out the door with a cheery wave. “Trust me, you deserve the compensation!” I call over my shoulder, dragging Moda with me. Back out on the street, I unwrap my sandwich and take a bite before turning to the girl. “So, docks? I gotta get moving asap,” I say around the food.

Moda stares for a moment before laughing. “Yes, of course! It’s just down that way, a straight shot to the harbour,” she says, pointing down a street and starting to walk down it.

“Ah, little lady, are you supposed to be out this late?” I ask, smile twitching up my lips as she halts in place before spinning back to me with a look of horror.

“I have to get back to the milk farm! Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry!” she gasps, frantically pivoting between the way she was going, the opposite way, and me. “I — like I said, a straight shot! Good luck getting to Ace, it was nice meeting you!” she cries, finally deciding and starting to jog down the opposite way.

“Thanks for everything!” I laugh back, waving until her back is to me and she’s running around the curve of a building. I turn the way she pointed, and move.

Moda was right; it’s a straight shot. Even *I* couldn’t get lost. (Something sad in the back of my mind whispers Zoro could have.) The sun is getting ready to set on the horizon, and most of the dock workers seem to have finished up and headed home already.

I idly finish off my sandwich, balling up the parchment paper and dropping it in a nearby trash can, then pop two of the pills the doc gave me in my mouth and dry swallow them.

I stop at the beginning of one of the long docks and heave a sigh. “Man, am I gonna have to steal a boat?” I mutter incredulously.

I don’t think I’m cut out for boat stealing. Or solo sailing in general.

“No need for that,” a voice drawls behind me. I jump and spin around, not having heard anyone approach. That seems to be a miracle, given the six or so men fanned out around me with smirks and sneers. “I’m sure we can take you *exactly* where you need to go.”

...Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Moda looking at Ed after they reference some stupid shit: ok so they're concussed and need a doctor, got it.

Gee wonder why Ed ended up on Lulusia. Wonder what was up with that beginning part. Wonder who these jackasses at the end are. So many mysteries! Surely this will have no consequences or strange connections later.

My guy cannot catch a fucking BREAK, please five minutes of PEACE for this POOR MOTHERFUCKER—
(I say as if I'm not the author. Who wrote it like this. On Purpose.)

Chapter 113: Chapter One Hundred and Thirteen: Hello, It's A Motherfucking Pleasure

Chapter Summary

Welcome To the Family - Watsky

I can take six-ish stupid losers no problem, right? Even with my head still kinda spinning and everything in general hurting, this should be easy street. I mean, if I had it my way I'd sleep for another week before trying to fight *anyone,* but I don't currently have that luxury.

Chapter Notes

Hi guys making yourself vomit will not stop you from asphyxiating and if you are drowning or someone is drowning around you DO NOT DO ANY SHIT THESE DUDES DO. Get someone certified in CPR on the case asap. Anyway that's your warning for potential drowning this chapter ✌

God I LOVE when things finally start coming together. This chapter is near and dear to my heart.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Right, so I'm probably getting mugged. I don't love that.

"Am I getting mugged? I don't love that," I vocalize.

The guy at the front of the pack laughs, making the rest of them join in. "No, no nothing like that," he says with a molasses-like smirk. "We're not mugging you, we're just gonna turn you in to old G-2 and get us a pretty little reward. Your bounty will make a nice contribution to our vacation fund."

Stupid fucking bastards.

“Right, so, no,” I scoff, hands already hovering over the handles of my guns. “I’m fucking *busy,* go play games with someone else.”

I can take six-ish stupid losers no problem, right? Even with my head still kinda spinning and everything in general hurting, this should be easy street. I mean, if I had it my way I’d sleep for another week before trying to fight *anyone,* but I don’t currently have that luxury.

“Games?” the guy at the front laughs again. “Don’t worry doll, I’m certain you’ll love this one.”

Ok so fuck this guy in particular. “You wanna dance, you rectal wart?” I growl, shifting my feet into a wider stance.

The guy’s face twists in derision at the name, jerking his chin up. I ready myself for one of the guys flanking him to come at me, which makes it all the more surprising when someone’s arms snap around my upper body, pinning my arms to my sides and lifting me off my feet.

I shriek, immediately kicking out and trying to bash my skull back into whoever grabbed me. My hat is knocked off my head, landing on the dock as my skull smashes solidly into someone’s chin. Whoever the guy is makes a grunt of pain, but it also sets my head spinning so violently I worry for the sandwich I just ate.

A couple of people are suddenly right there, grabbing my flailing legs and locking them together. “Now, now, would you please calm yourself?” the front guy tuts, strolling over while I try and jerk my arms out of the guy behind me’s hold. “Really, we can do this in a civilized manner if you just cooperate.”

“Fuck you!” I snarl, having a bit of trouble getting myself to look straight. There’s some real weird shapes floating around the edges of my vision making it quite hard to concentrate.

The guy makes some kind of gesture I really wish I could make out, then all the guys holding me start walking down the dock. I’m still struggling and thrashing about, the same panic that

took over in Sabaody rushing through my body.

Except this time they're actually holding my limbs down with some amount of finesse, and it's downright fucking *depressing* these randos are better at it than the guys who do this as a profession.

"I really would suggest you knock that off," the guy says conversationally as the tangled ball of us stops moving. "After all, your darling poster says you've got a Devil Fruit, and thus a funny little weakness to sea water."

My vision aligns and I see what he was getting at. The group of men are holding me over the edge of the dock, and the main guy is looking at me with a smug smile.

Oh right. I have a Devil Fruit.

Man I'm fucking *stupid* in high stress situations.

I see the guy's expression morph as I set my jaw with determination, and he makes a gesture before I've had the chance to do anything more than pick a target.

The shock of cold sea water is immediate and really should not have been that surprising. The sons of bitches, so fast it was actually ridiculous, slammed me into the dock and shoved me headfirst underwater.

Bubbles swarm up my nose and my body flails desperately against what's holding it before that cotton-soft and thick-as-tar weakness washes over me. Salt stings in my eyes as they stare wide down at the glittering depths of the water and the odd shadows of those who just dunked me into it.

Oh. Neat. I'm gonna die.

I'm submerged up to my armpits, the rest of me going numb even to the rough grip of hands. I'm practically paralyzed by the woozy feeling of water pressing in around my head and shoulders. It floods in my nose and mouth, my jaw not even cooperating enough to close it from the open scream it's stuck in.

Damnit. Damnit damnit damnit.

If I was nauseous and lightheaded before, it's nothing compared to now. My chest is so tight with the fear and the pain of air not entering my lungs I worry my heart may stop entirely before the water or the guys even get their chance to kill me.

He's still waiting, goddamnit he's still waiting—

You don't stop hurting or panicking until the very end, when you're drowning. Frantic movement eats up the oxygen in your bloodstream, flooding it with carbon dioxide. Your body tries to hold out until the very last second, your throat seals itself and refuses to let up, it tries to divert the water into your stomach instead of your lungs. How long until I go unconscious and even that automatic response relaxes? How long until cardiac arrest? Until brain damage? Brain *death?*

Wait, please, I'm sorry, please, one last time, let me see him ***one last time PLEASE—***

The hands around my upper arms go vice tight and wrench.

I hack desperately as I'm yanked above the surface and dragged further onto the dock. I'm pressed firmly down on my stomach, someone delivers a harsh smack to my back, then someone else sticks a finger in the back of my throat until I'm vomiting sea water over the worn and wet wood.

Well, sea water along with my fucking sandwich. Motherfuckers.

I cough and wheeze, twisting my head away from the gross mess on the dock and sucking in air like a desperate man. A hand grabs at my hair and jerks my head up, the stupid fucking man from before smiling benevolently at me.

"Are you ready to behave now?" he asks, face downcast in a mockery of disapproval.

"Fuck you," I rasp, still gasping for breath.

"Do you need another dunk?" he asks with a false sympathetic look.

"No!" I croak, struggling back weakly against the guys still holding me down to the dock. "Fucking — let go! I wasn't even treated this badly by *slavers!* How much of an ass do you have to be to do worse than *goddamn slavers?!"*

"Now you're just being hurtful," the guy mutters distastefully. "We're nothing like slavers, all we want is to hand you over to the Marines without a fight. Now are you going to comply, or do you need a couple more rinses before you're convinced?"

Fuck this guy. Fuck this guy fuck this guy FUCK THIS GUY.

"What a scary look," the guy comments reproachfully. "Come now, surely the Marines will treat a pretty little thing like you better than these slavers you mentioned. If you stop being difficult, we can hand you off to their delicate care without any more… persuasion."

"No can do, ass wagon," I sneer, baring my teeth at him. "I've got a date I'm already *terribly* late for."

He uses the hand in my hair to slam my cheek into the dock, just missing the remains of my dinner. "I think you need another dip to cool your head," he hisses. "Maybe after you've had a long hard think underwater you'll be more receptive to reason."

I start struggling anew as the guys holding me start dragging me closer to the edge of the dock again, the boards running under my stomach like piano keys. “No! Let me GO! Fucking — stop it!” I shriek, thrashing desperately.

No no no not back in the water don’t put me in the water—

The water fucking explodes up beside the dock. We all stare at the white spray, tall and sudden enough the grips on me go slack. I, opportunistic as I am, ignore whatever *that* imminent threat is to kick ass.

I wretch one of my legs free and kick one of the men that had been holding it in the face, sending him hurtling back down the dock towards the pier. Then I rip one of my arms free and grab onto the hair of the guy who grabbed me from behind, twisting his gravity and swinging him, *by the hair,* into the other guy that latched onto my arms.

I swing myself onto my back with my free leg, putting whatever is in the water behind me, then kicking another one of them in the face and once again shifting their gravity until he’s rocketing over the water. I yank one of my pistols out as the remaining guys start panicking about *me* instead of whatever is happening in the water, and one of them collapses dead from a bullet between the eyes before he can even blink.

“H — Holy shit!” one of the remaining guys shrieks, staring behind me in unabashed horror.

I shoot him in the stomach, reach out and slap him on the calf, and send him hurting into the water.

The second last guy suddenly goes shooting past me, hitting the edge of the dock before crashing back into the water, screaming and flailing as a weird black *something* looks like it was sprayed all across his chest.

The last guy, THE fucking guy, grabs me by the hair and yanks up *hard,* wretching me to my feet. I start struggling before there’s a big butcher knife right at my neck. “H — Hey! Don’t move, or the pirate gets it!” he yells shakily, staring terrified at the end of the dock. I turn and finally see what it was that disturbed the water and has this guy nearly pissing his pants.

I stare up at the *giant fucking Sea King* and the *man sitting on its head* with my jaw on the floor.

"Yo," the man greets.

The guy drops the knife with a whimper, taking two stumbling steps back before I just lift my gun and blow a bullet through his ear, not taking my eyes off the newcomer for a second. His body splashes lifelessly into the water and I barely feel the satisfaction around my shock.

"Jesus Christ," I say faintly.

The man smirks down at me, tossing long silver hair — with quite a few stubborn strands of brown, and half of it tied in a bun atop his head — over his shoulder. "Not quite but I see where the confusion comes from," he drawls, voice straight from the soundtrack that plays whenever it gets too quiet on the ship, and so achingly familiar yet foreign.

"...Coin..?" I say slowly, completely helpless to the awe that takes over my tone.

His smirk broadens into a grin, stash and goatee doing nothing to hide it. "In the flesh."

Coin stands and walks along the Sea King, steps light and easy and not missing a stride as the beast gets closer to the dock in a practiced movement. Then Coin is on the dock, and he's standing right in front of me.

I stare up at him and idly note he's over six feet tall. He's wearing a white ruffled V-neck shirt with big Snow White ass puffy ribbon sleeves with dark blue fabric visible underneath, coming down to his elbow but leaving his inked forearms on display. He has these weird half-black half-blue wrappy pants tucked into knee high leather boots with knee pads at the top, and a rapier of some sort secured to his hip with a vivid blue sash that matches the ribbons and strips of clothing tied and stacked on his wrists.

“Well, let me look at you,” he murmurs, staring down at me with that same open awe I displayed earlier.

I shift my weight between my feet, suddenly embarrassed and feeling like being beaten to shit and half covered in bandages with my hair soaked and plastered to my forehead isn’t nearly dressed up enough for this.

Coin’s hands come up and hover over my face for a moment, like he’s unsure whether he’s allowed to touch me. That’s stupid, so I lean forward to make them land on my cheeks.

His face settles into this reverent smile, running his thumbs across my cheekbones and slit eyebrow, tilting my head, pushing bangs back and skimming nails over the shaved hair behind my ears. His hands migrate to my shoulders where he just squeezes for a second, smile going from full of wonder to just indescribably warm.

“Wow,” he breathes. “Just… wow!”

Then he starts giggling. I can’t help but start giggling too. In an instant it’s too much, and I lurch forward to hug him.

It’s like he had the exact same idea, arms already halfway to holding me before I’m moving. One snaps around my waist, the other across my upper back as he lifts me off my feet. I bury my face in his hair and his ruffled collar, hands going over his shoulders and clenching tight on the back of his shirt. We’re both still laughing, chests shaking with it as he starts spinning us around.

“Oh my god!” he laughs, pure fucking elation in every syllable.

“Oh my god!” I repeat back, the overwhelming joy infectious.

Coin stops spinning and slowly lowers me to my feet, grabbing my face in both hands again with the widest smile I’ve ever seen on someone without Luffy’s rubber cheeks. “Look at

you!" he cries. "Wow! You're perfect!"

My face goes warm under his hands, but I know I'm grinning just as hard. "You're here," I choke out, throat still feeling rough from the sea water.

His entire face softens, pulling me forward to press a tender kiss into the centre of my forehead. "Of course, I told you I'd be here when you need me," he murmurs into my skin.

I feel tears prick at my eyes, and quickly cough into my hand to distract from that. Coin pulls back and gives me a slightly worried look, but I wave him off. "Sorry, I was kinda drowning a second ago," I laugh semi-nervously.

He makes an 'ahh' sound, taking a step back and relocating his hands on my shoulders. "Got it. Stand still for a moment, I'm gonna…" he trails off, eyes going distant while it looks like he's staring into my fucking soul. I stand still for a moment, looking off to the side as he seems to scan me up and down. "Right! Don't sleep on your back for a while and you should be fine, not too much in your lungs that your body won't absorb after a bit," he announces.

I blink rapidly at him. "Hah? You can just… *see* that?" I ask incredulously.

Coin shrugs a shoulder. "It's a talent," he says, both breezy and smug.

Dear god, no fucking wonder people compared us before I even knew the guy.

"What the hell was with the black shit when you hit that guy?" I ask, turning around as if his ass isn't at the bottom of the ocean by now.

"More talent," he sings, chuckling when I give him a pointed look. "Kidding. My Haki is like… *really* weird. It's got a tendency to leave marks behind when I'm not making a point not to."

“How the actual fresh fuck does that work?” I question incredulously.

He shrugs. “Who knows? I’ve got a batshit insane signature too — no Conquerors to speak of, but if I project it loud enough it works basically the same. Nothing wants to come near a guy who sounds like he’s internally screaming his ass off.”

“Screaming..?” I mutter under my breath, brow furrowing. Why does that sound… Eh, whatever.

I shift my gaze over his shoulder to the, again, *GIANT FUCKOFF SEA KING HE RODE IN ON*. It’s got a long pointed nose almost like a swordfish, but is significantly stockier and has a speckled mix of blues splashed across it. There’s an assortment of fins on all sides, with one between its wide reflective eyes and a large one down its back.

“So, uh… what’s up with that?” I ask, pointing to the massive creature. Fucking *hell,* that thing’s at least two Coin’s high. Probably *more.*

Coin glances over his shoulder and makes another ‘ah’ sound, like he forgot that was a thing that was odd. “This here is my special lady, Pontiac,” he introduces with proud affection, sweeping a dramatic arm at her.

“Pontiac?” I repeat incredulously. The Sea King seems to fucking *preen* at the attention.

Coin shrugs. “Named her after the Pontiac Tempest I had back home,” he explains.

“...So you named her *Pontiac* and not *Tempest?”* I repeat again.

He stares into the distance for a second. “Damn,” he whispers. “I *knew* you’d be smarter than me.”

I have no way to respond to that. *I love this man already.*

Oh but wait — I reach out and smack him on the arm *hard.* “That’s for teaching Shanks, and by extension LUFFY, fucking *YEET SWAG!”* I yell, shaking my fist at him.

“Ow!” he whines, as if my ass could do any damage to him at all. “I’m sorry! It was a joke, I didn’t think he’d actually pass that on!”

I grumble and shake my fist more. I’ll be more mad about this later when I’m not high off endorphins and the jubilation of finally meeting this fuckhead.

“You got some kinda plan, I’m assuming?” Coin says, voice lilting up at the end. It just kinda hits me at once he has the same stupid fucking accent I do. It’s a small detail, but it makes me all warm and shit on the inside knowing it hasn’t faded over the years he’s been here.

“Yeah, I do,” I respond.

He gives me this wicked curling smile, the creases at the corners of his eyes deepening. “Perfect. Wherever you gotta go, me and Pontiac are at your service. Just give me a destination, we’ll have you there in record time.”

I burst into a bit of tears.

Coin immediately starts panicking, hands fluttering around me while he stammers. “Whoa! What’s wrong, are you ok?!”

“So much *pizzazz,”* I whine, wiping tears off my face. Coin stops his hovering to burst into incredulous laughter. “Ughhhh, I’ve done so much crying recently it’s disgusting. How fast can you get me to Amazon Lily?” I ask.

Coin’s eyes curve into crescents, his thumb coming up to flick at the solid gold gauges stretching his lobes. I notice he has two chunky gold hoops in his cartilage too, the same on

both ears. “How’s tomorrow morning sound?”

My jaw drops. “Tomorrow — Lulusia is far as fuck from there! How the hell are you gonna —”

“Kid,” he interrupts with a smirk, “trust me. Pontiac can do it.”

I stare for a long moment. “Dear god. Ok. Yeah, ok.” I scrub my hands down my face for a long moment, wondering what the fuck I’ve gotten myself into. “Wait — how the hell did you even find me?” I ask incredulously.

“You gave Shakky my letter,” he says simply. “When you and your crew went airmail, she called me up to let me know. Said it was probably the kind of emergency I was talking about. Plus…” Coin smirks and reaches into his shirt, plucking out a half ripped piece of paper. “You’ve got a little something of mine,” he drawls.

I blink twice before scrambling for my — well, his — spyglass, yanking it out and spinning it around like I’ll spontaneously be able to find what he’s talking about. Coin reaches out and plucks it from my hands, twisting the front lens until there’s a click. I watch with a gaped mouth as he just fucking slides half the barrel down, revealing a small scrap of paper that was apparently sandwiched by the shell he removed and the actual barrel.

“Holy mother of fuck,” I say faintly as the scrap starts slowly drifting towards the sheet he’s holding. “How long has it had that?”

“Since I put it there,” he says simply, replacing the piece and sliding everything back together until the spyglass is whole once more. “This baby’s got all kinds of tricks, I’ll show you them all someday. This one’s a favourite though,” he snickers, doing a half clockwise turn with the eyepiece at the end before *pulling the damn thing out.*

I — I’ve got no words. I just stare at the fucking *lighter that’s apparently been inside this thing* ***the whole goddamn time.***

I take the spyglass, reassembled, with hands numb from shock as he passes it to me, sliding it back into its tube with my jaw still on the floor.

"You cold in that getup, kid?" he suddenly asks. I look down at my attire, much of the turtleneck crop top soaking wet with my hair still dripping water down the back.

"Uh," I say unintelligently and abruptly quite cold in the evening air, "a little."

Coin snorts, pivoting to whistle with two fingers. "Pontiac! Could you pass me my bag?" he calls. The Sea King rises a bit out of the water, her spine doing this weird roll thing as she slides even closer to the dock until this fucking — I don't even *know,* a saddle-like thingy I guess — is easily accessible.

It's settled between the two fins going down her back, thick straps securing it around her belly. It seems to like… fork off at the back, extending past where the fin starts but with a gap left for it to bisect the thing, and effectively splitting it into two seat-like parts.

Coin jumps up onto it with the aid of a kinda stirrup/step thing and the straps and flips open a big brown leather bag in one of the seat-ish things, rooting around for a second before grabbing something and holding it up. "A couple sizes too big for you, but can you make this work?" he asks, jerking his head at the deep blue button up that matches the rest of the blue he's wearing.

I give him a wordless thumbs up, going into a little bit of shock as the situation sets in a bit.

"Well? C'mon kid, we gotta get a move on if you wanna make good time," he laughs, holding a hand out.

I move forward to take it before stopping short. "Oh shit, gimme a second!" I blurt, turning and sprinting down the dock to grab my hat where it fell earlier, then sprinting back. "I don't wanna put this on my wet hair," I mutter to myself, idly shaking my head and making water fly everywhere.

“Pots,” Coin prompts, tapping his toe on the saddle thingy.

The Sea King’s head swivels towards me, then she’s blowing a heavy stream of air directly in my face, effectively blow-drying me. I stare at her as she winks — *fucking winks at me what the fuck* — actively feeling my hair poof up around me.

“What the fuck has my life become,” I breathe out, turning and staring forlornly into the setting sun.

Coin bursts into laughter again, shaking his hand with a raised eyebrow. I reach out and take it, letting him pull me up onto the saddle thing.

“This world is weird as fuck, but it’s also beautiful as fuck, and it’ll suprise you for your entire life if you let it,” he says warmly, tucking the shirt over my shoulders and guiding my arms into the sleeves before doing one golden button up.

“I believe that,” I laugh lightly, settling my hat onto my back with the string around my neck.

“We’re gonna move at speeds that’ll boggle your fucking *mind,* but you just hold on tight and everything is gonna be fine. Pontiac knows how to make the trip as comfortable as possible,” Coin chuckles, steering me to the front of the saddle thing and guiding me to sit down before sitting behind me.

“Just how fast does this gal go?” I ask incredulously. Coin just laughs ominously.

“Before we get moving though, a question,” he says, suddenly more serious. “We’re gonna blow past Momoiro, do you want to pick up your cook?”

I pause, eyes dropping to my hands. Do I..?

“No,” I decide. I’m not going to drag any of the Strawhats into this, I’m going to be selfish and I’m going to keep them safe.

Coin studies me for a moment before shaking his head with a smile. “Alright. I understand.”

I cross my legs as Coin grabs some kinda reins or something that are threaded through loops in the rail/lip of the saddle on either side of me. “You ready, Pontiac? Let’s show the kiddo just what you can do,” he calls up playfully.

Pontiac makes these strange joyful sounds almost like a laugh.

“You might wanna brace yourself,” he advises nonchalantly, cueing the reins.

“Wait how bad is the takeoff—”

We move at speeds that boggle my fucking *mind.*

Coin starts laughing maniacally while I start screaming, my back slamming into his chest while he leans his head in beside mine and smiles wide. “I’ve got a lot of shit I wanna show you kid, this is just the beginning of it!”

I stare at the profile of his face in awe as he grins straight ahead. Holy *shit.*

Lulusia is gone before I know it, fading into a blip on the horizon as the sky burns orange. I guess it’s a good thing I didn't put my hat back on, since it would have blown off and smacked Coin in the face as the wind whips through my now dry hair.

“We’re gonna dip underwater for a moment to pick up speed. Don’t worry, you’ll be perfectly fine,” he says calmly, nudging my shoulder with one of his forearms.

“Uh — Are you sure about that?!” I yelp, hands clamping tight on the lip of the saddle.

Coin laughs, bright and clear like a bell as he cues the reins again. “Absolutely I am!”

And then Pontiac is submerging. I reflexively hold my breath before realising the water isn’t coming anywhere near us. A glassy, holographic film wrapping around the saddle keeps it out like a damn forcefield.

“Wha…” I trail off, staring in astonishment at the water rushing past the bubble as we reach speeds my brain can’t even comprehend.

“Pretty fuckin’ cool, huh?” Coin chuckles, watching my wonder with so much fondness it’s hard to swallow. “Rails helped me out with this one.”

“Rails?” I ask distractedly, staring at the distant shapes moving in the water.

“Rayleigh. I’ll call him pretty much anything with a Ray-ish sound in it, but that’s a favourite,” he dismisses. “Racecar, Ray-Ban, Death Ray, Radiator, I can get away with pretty much anything.”

I laugh a little breathlessly, staring upwards at the sparkling distant surface of the water. This is fucking *insane,* holy *fuck* I can’t *believe—*

“Aaaaand ascending,” Coin announces, though he really doesn’t have to as we shoot up and out of the water, the bubble popping around us as we get air, arcing over the waves as a gasp gets strangled in my throat.

We land smoothly back in the water, Pontiac not missing a spec of momentum as we continue towards Amazon Lily.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I whisper reverently.

“You know what? I’ll take it,” Coin cackles.

And we continue making a break for the setting sun.

Chapter End Notes

IT’S HIM IT’S HIIIIIIIIIIIIM!!!! I been waiting for this one, TURN IT UP!!!!!!!!

Are you kidding of course I have art of him, and Ed's new outfit, AND Pontiac, ready to go. I have been waiting for this gorgeous son of a bitch for so long. And wait till you see him in his prime, WHOOOOOOOOOOOOO BOY. Anyway my man out here stubbornly refusing to go completely grey on PRINCIPLE and with DISCIPLINE and maybe a little bit of BRIBERY with the GODS. I do not blame him, you gotta protect that shiny mane of hair at all costs.

You'll get full details and visuals of his tattoos next chapter, because UGH I love them but again tattoo design really isn't my calling. I DID TRY REALLY HARD WITH HIS THO. AND I'M REALLY PROUD OF THEM.

Physics isn't real and I don't believe in things making sense. Ascending and descending pressure and G-force don't exist. What the fuck are you gonna do about it?

Man I was really temped to just fucking nab Sanji and bring him along on this, but NO. For many reasons that is a no go. He will be missed ✊😔

NEXT CHAPTER IS THE REALLY FUCKING LONG ONE.

Chapter 114: Chapter One Hundred and Fourteen: Making My Way Towards You

Chapter Summary

Paladin Strait - twenty one pilots

My mouth opens and I stare at him with wide eyes. “You… you stayed for me..?” I ask in disbelief.

Chapter Notes

Listening to Clancy on the Sea King, what about it? This is my compromise since I can't see them on tour T-T

Yeah ok maybe I got carried away and wrote 6k because I'm certified insane. In my defense writing the Coin & Ed dynamic is so fucking fun. Get ready for GOOFS and LORE and FEELINGS GALORE. Never say I don't give you nice things, longest chapter to date and it's almost entirely fluff.

Should any of the Roger Pirates know Rouge existed? Probably not but I can't make myself give a fuck and for humor I can ignore SO many plot pit traps.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wait, he wanted to *what?”* I ask incredulously, a laugh already half out of my mouth.

“You heard me, Roger wanted to tattoo Rouge’s name across his chest and I had to talk him down!” Coin laughs right along with me. “I only managed it with comments about how he’s always got his shirt open, which led him to wanting it tattooed on his *ass!”*

I smack my hand into the saddle, bending in half and nearly slamming my forehead into my knees. We’ve been riding Pontiac for upwards of a couple of hours now, it’s fully nighttime with the sky full of stars as Coin tells me stories and stupid shit about his days with the Roger Pirates.

“I had to talk him out of that too, the fucking moron. I had to actually sit his drunk ass down and say ‘Roger, the next time you have to go running naked from the Marines they’re gonna see her fuckin’ name, and what then?’ And still! Still he wouldn’t see reason!” he caterwauls. “Rails had to hold him while he cried for three hours after I said no!”

“Why does the King of the Pirates running naked from the Marines sounded more like an inevitability than a wild example?!” I question incredulously, completely unable to keep the smile off my face.

Coin puts a heavy hand on my shoulder and I turn around to face him. He heaves a world-weary sigh and looks me right in the eyes like he’s being forced to. “You would be horrified, shocked and appalled by the sheer amount of times this happened. It’s a frankly absurd number,” he says solemnly.

I burst into another round of uncontrollable cackles.

———

“So are you and Scooper Gaban still married?” I ask, sticking a granola bar Coin had offered in my mouth and rolling the sleeves of my borrowed shirt as high as they’ll go.

“Goddammit we got that ANNULLED—” he shrieks.

“I’ve heard there was copious amounts of alcohol involved, I gotta say Coin I’m feeling pretty good about my own impulse marriage being under no influence but my own,” I drawl smugly.

“Wait you got married?” Coin blurts, dropping one hand off the reins to grab at my own, pulling it closer to his face so he can inspect my ring. *“Goddamn,* who did you snatch up?”

“I didn’t snatch *shit,* I got yanked outta the water and I’ve been dragged ever since,” I correct. “Monkey D. Luffy is a force of fucking nature, but he’s my force of nature, so what

can you do?"

He blinks for a second before something unbridled and warm blooms across his face. *"Aw,* really? That's too cute. I never took him for the romantic type, good going and congratulations," he praises.

"He isn't, we're uh…" I grasp for the words, "queerplatonic, I guess? Something to that effect."

Coin hums in understanding. "Either way, I'm terribly happy for you. He's a catch. Frankly, anyone on your crew would be. I'm a little hurt I wasn't invited to the ceremony, though."

"You weren't exactly on speed dial, fuckhead," I scoff. "And I mean, I smooched just under half of them, does that count for anything?"

"Ok, *slut,"* he scoffs playfully.

I gasp in mock offense. *"Coin!* Why, never in my years have I been so underestimated! I'm a first class *whore,* thank you very much!"

"Yeah, well can you say you've kissed both the Pirate King *and* his First Mate in rapid succession, drunk though you were?" he shoots back.

I take a moment to turn back to him in horror. "Tell me you didn't have sex with the Pirate King or his First Mate," I beg.

"With Roger? Yes. Several times," Coin confirms. "And Rayleigh? Also yes. Also several times."

"WHOOOOOOOOOORE—"

_____

“Sooooo,” I drawl jokingly, “the One Piece? How was that?”

Coin throws his head back and laughs. “Yeah right! That’s one thing you get no spoilers on, you gotta go see for yourself. But when you find it,” Coin chuckles again, softer as he shakes his head. “Oh, you’ll laugh your ass off.”

I hum, leaning my head back onto his chest.

“One more thing,” he says slowly. I hum again. “When you’re on Laugh Tale, you’re gonna be offered a way home.”

I pause for a second, then jolt up ramrod straight. “What?” I ask incredulously, spinning around.

Coin nods. “It’ll be an option for you, if you want to take it.”

I stare at him, then off into the water as we rocket through it, thoughts going even faster than Pontiac is. Then something clicks and my eyes dart back to him. “Wait, if you were offered a way home, why are—”

“Why am I still around?” Coin interrupts with a wry smile thrown down at me before his gaze returns forward. “Simple, kid. I chose to stay. As for why…” his voice trails off as he turns and looks at me again, longer and with a soft look in his eyes. “Well, someone had to stick around and train you, eh?”

My mouth opens and I stare at him with wide eyes. “You… you stayed for me..?” I ask in disbelief.

Coin laughs and gives me a big warm grin. "'Course I did!" he says, like it's obvious. "I mean, go back to my day job and annoying coworker *Bradley* or stay here and watch you take on the world? The choice was obvious. And I might be limited in what I can help you with, but I'll be damned if I can't get you up to New World standards in two years."

I think on that. "Yeah, yeah I get it," I murmur.

"But keep in mind, no one will begrudge you if you do decide to take the offer," Coin adds gently. "Roger wouldn't have begrudged me, and Luffy wouldn't begrudge you. Maybe you have people waiting for you, or you wanna go try living out dreams of a more mundane sort, or maybe you'll just be tired of the danger and will be ready for the rest. No matter the reason, it's your choice and you're allowed to make it however you please."

I nod silently and return to facing forward.

_____

I'm idly tracing the lines of Coin's sleeve tattoos, shucking his disney princess sleeves up over his shoulders while he just lets me and keeps an eye on the stars and surrounding water. He had lit up these lamps at some point after I started squinting at the black ink, so we're like a small beacon in the dark blue expanse of ocean and sky.

I work slowly, noting the base details seem to be the same across both sleeves. They both have a compass rose nautical star thing at his elbows, with a circle in the middle of it and lines leading out from the points and wrapping all around his arm with concentric circles radiating with them. There's also the same lines like waves or water on both, these small circles I assume are stars, and faint lines connecting some of them.

The left arm has a large boat that takes up most of his wrist and nearly wraps all around his forearm, one I vaguely recognize as the Oro Jackson. "Franky would love this part," I murmur, tapping and tracing along its sails and rails.

"I'm sure he would, Tom did beyond a fantastic job on her," Coin chuckles. "I'd like to meet that kid again someday."

This side also has a tentacle curling and coiling around the upper arm, with a pointed arrowhead-like tip pointing at the compass. The second I open my mouth, Coin is giving me a pointed look. “Don’t make the joke. It’s low hanging fruit.”

Damn. Fair enough.

The right has an anchor splayed on his forearm, no stock across the top and a circle or something in the middle of the crown, a rope curled through the head and twining in loops and curves all the way up his arm. There’s also another tentacle that passes under the anchor and winds up to just above the crook of his elbow.

A second tentacle comes down from his armpit of all places, the goddamn weirdo, and ends beside another boat of some sort. “What’s this one?” I ask, taping the ink proud against his bicep.

Coin glances at it with a fond smile. “Ah, that was our first ship, the one Rails stole. Called her the Flambuoyer, I miss that gorgeous girl,” he reminisces.

“The Flambuoyer?” I repeat in a deadpan.

“Hey, I named her! It seemed appropriate, with Roger’s swanky ass in charge,” he grumbles. *“Plus,* it’s a pun on buoyancy. It’s goddamn *genius.”*

I roll my eyes and go back to staring at his tattoos. “Did you do all of these yourself? Some of this shit is really detailed and would probably be hard as fuck to reach,” I ask. “Oh god, are you ambidextrous *and* double jointed or something?”

Coin laughs. “No, nothing like that. We met this guy with a Devil Fruit ability — can’t remember the actual name for the life of me — so I did all the work myself. And let me tell you, tattooing your own body while not *in* your body is a fucking weird experience.”

I make a face. “Sure fucking *sounds* weird.” Then my eyes catch on something. “Hey wait — is that the Little and Big Dipper?” I ask, twisting his arm and pulling it closer to the light so I can see better.

“Sure is!” he says proudly. “I’ve got a few constellations from home around, there’s Cygnus, Cassiopeia, Leo, Lyra, Auriga, Dorado, Cepheus, Ophiuchus… really anything I could remember doing on this repeating client I had, she was a real weirdo about which ones she chose. Besides that I’ve also got—”

“Hey!” I gasp, yanking his arm again. “That’s the money and the prince! Luffy told me about this one!” I say excitedly, pointing to the spots on his left shoulder.

Coin perks up at that. “Really? It’s one of my favourites here — it’s called Simius et Regulus, or Iunctus, depending where you are. It’s a little funny, back home Regulus is a star in Leo, but in this world it’s the head of a prince made out of stars. And I’ve got both of ‘em right here on my skin,” he says, methodical and proud.

“I didn’t know it had a proper name,” I murmur, eyes automatically snapping to it in the sky. I guess it tracks that Luffy wouldn’t know it either way.

“C’mon, I’ll show you some of the other ones,” he invites, holding one arm out and pointing up with the other. “That’s Magna Turtur, he lives on my right wrist. I got him to commemorate when Roger almost got eaten by this turtle, not even a big turtle just a regular turtle…”

———

“What did you mean earlier, when you said you were limited by what you can help me with?” I ask a while later while we’re once again under the surface and shooting like a rocket through the water. “Actually, better question, how the actual *fuck* did you know I was gonna exist as all?”

Coin had left the reins unattended in the saddle loops, citing Pontiac’s incredible underwater sense of direction and her knowing where she’s going, while both of us sit face to face and

play Speed.

(I have won every single round.)

Coin pauses with a card halfway to the pile in the middle, looking up at me while I politely place my last card there instead. “Speed, by the way,” I add.

“You’re devious,” he accuses. I shrug. “As for your question… it’s kind of all tied up in one answer, but I have a question for *you* first.”

I arch an eyebrow, but gesture for him to go ahead while our game goes unplayed.

“Have you been having weird dreams since you arrived here?” Coin asks, brown eyes intense and reflective in the small amount of lamplight we have down where the sun doesn’t shine.

My focus snaps to attention. “What?”

“Weird dreams,” he repeats. “Things you wouldn’t dream about back home. Like a voice or —”

“Uh, yeah I’ve heard a weird voice,” I interrupt, scooching forward. “Wait, do you hear that thing too? What the hell is it?”

“What do you know about it already?” he counters. I frown.

“I mean… it calls me weird names and says cryptic shit? I don’t really know much of anything,” I admit.

Coin looks heavenward for a moment. “Yeah that tracks,” he mutters before returning his gaze to me. “First thing you need to understand is I can only tell you what I can tell you, kid. Do you understand?” he asks, voice insistent.

I frown harder, but nod. “Yeah, I got it.”

“When I got here, I fell outta the damn sky and landed in the water right beside Roger and Rayleigh days after the two of them set out,” he explains. “My ass flailed to the surface and the first thing I said was ‘sup fellas, lovely day for a swim!’ They immediately decided to kidnap me, because I’m amazing like that.”

“Question about that; when exactly were you from?” I interject.

“It was uhhh… April?” he says slowly, brows scrunching. “The calendar at work said May, though… or was that because Bradley changed it over..?”

“April 30th, 2023?” I blurt, rocking forward and knocking over the pile of cards he still hadn’t collected.

Coin’s eyes widen and he snaps. “That’s it! Wait, did you—”

“We died on the same day,” I realise. “How — man you’re *old!* How the fuck are we..?”

“Ok, I’m 76 and I earned those years,” he says defensively. “Kid, I’ve got no answers for you on this one. What I do know is this; after I got here I started hearing weird shit in my dreams. Muffled and weird snippets of dialogue and shit, and eventually I started getting weird cryptic bullshit from this… voice without a voice.”

“Chimes. Twang of a triangle,” I breathe out.

Coin smiles. “That’s the one. I didn’t really get what it was saying at first, a lot of it I still don’t get, but I understood at least one thing.” Coin looks at me like he can see every single path my life could take. “Someone else would come. I was just the trial run for whoever was coming next.”

“A trial run?” I say a little numbly. “How — how could it call *you* a — *a trial run?!”* I repeat indignantly.

“I appreciate the quick defense, but kid you really don’t gotta get all worked up,” Coin laughs. “I don’t *care* if I was just a precursor to whatever it is you’re gonna bring. Fucking hell, I have lived a life full of so much more freedom and fun and *love* then I ever could have imagined I’d have. They can call it whatever they like, I know exactly what the life I’ve lived is worth.”

I stare at him in awe. That’s… just fucking *wow.*

“Anyway, I knew someone would be following after me for a long time,” he continues, fiddling with one of his blue ribbon bracelets. “I wanted to make things better for you, keep you safer then the set path planned for you to be. But the first time I tried to change something…”

I tilt my head as he trails off. “...What happened?” I asked hesitantly.

“Well, I tried to murder Kaido on God Valley and instead got put in a week-long coma,” he says lightly. My jaw drops. “It wasn’t that bad, I didn’t know anything had happened until I woke up. I sure gave my crew quite the fright though, suddenly dropping in the middle of my attack. Rails apparently had to drag my unconscious body outta there, didn’t love hearing that after the fact.”

“But — what put you out for that long out of nowhere?” I ask, just a little afraid of whatever the answer will be.

“That’s the fun part,” he says with a sardonic smile. “A while after that we were on this random island and I ended up inside this crumbling church. Dunno why, I was mostly trying

to get away from people for a bit. The crew got a tendency to hover after the coma thing. They all thought I had a brain tumor or some shit."

"Yeah, I'd probably guess that too," I mutter.

Coin shoots me a look. "Anyway. I'm just chilling in there, then suddenly this fucking statue starts moving. I tried to kill it immediately, of course, I'm not out here trying to get Weeping Angel-ed. But then the fucking thing starts talking, and well… I think you can guess."

"Are you fucking kidding?" I deadpan. "Your ass had a communion with *god possessing a statue in a* ***crumbling church?"***

"I don't think it's a god, per say," he mumbles, scratching the back of his neck. "At least that's what it told me. Either way, basically I got threatened into not ruining shit for you. In retrospect, it kinda had a point." Coin suddenly dips forward into a bow deep enough his hair pools over our scattered cards. "Kid, I hope you can forgive me for trying to control your adventure. In my defense, I was kinda dumb when I was younger."

I squawk, trying to yank his head up by the hair. "Stop that! Dear god, knock it off! I don't care about that!"

Coin laughs, letting me push him back upright. "Ok, ok. Got it, my apology's accepted."

"You goddamn weirdo, I don't want an apology in the *first place—"*

_____

"Hey Coin, did the Roger Pirates know you knew shit?" I ask, back to back with him and resting my head on his shoulder while I stare up at the stars and chew some jerky he passed me to go with two more of the pills from the doctor.

“Not all of them,” he responds.

“So some knew?” I question, frowning at the sky.

Coin heaves a sigh that makes my body rise up then back down. “I never explicitly told them anything, but you know how it is. At the very least Roger knew, but he’s always been a special case,” he says, voice nostalgic.

“Yeah?” I murmur.

“Yeah,” he parrots. “He used to say I looked at him like he was already dead, back when we first met. I shook it off over the years, but he knew.”

I close my eyes against the wistful and raw quality of his voice, like it could give him any semblance of privacy.

“Roger knew he was going to die,” he admits. My breath hitches. “Guess I didn’t hide my feelings quite well enough when his health took a nosedive. After we got Crocus, he asked if I knew, and I knew. His stupid ass laughed of course, then *apologized,* said he was sorry for that weighing on me. Idiot,” he curses fondly. “Rails caught on too, after we got Roger’s diagnosis. Said it was the last dot to connect, then laughed too. After confirming I didn’t know what was waiting for us, they left it alone.”

“So just those two?” I question gently.

“Oden knew too,” he shrugs, then laughs a little. “I don’t even know how! He just turned to me one day and said ‘is the food in your world better?’ Like, how do you respond to that? I just said no, and he never brought it up again! Toki might have known too, but not the kids.”

“Did you ever regret not telling them directly?” I pose quietly, fidgeting with the rest of my jerky chunk.

“There were times I wish I could have told them,” he acknowledges. “But then again, Roger knew me down to my bones without ever needing to be told a damn thing, and Rails is one to let actions speak more than words. The boys were weirdos on a good day, Buggy’s brain would have melted if he knew. And the rest of the crew — Gabon, Crocus, Sunbell, all of them — what good would it have done them?”

There’s a moment of relative silence, just the rushing water and Pontiac’s soft noises. “Did you…” I start, quiet and hesitant.

“Did I..?” Coin prompts.

“Were there things you regret not being able to change?” I ask a little helplessly.

Coin makes a sound too faint to be a snort. “I try not to regret, kid. ‘What if’s will suck the life outta you. But…” he trails off into a melancholic sigh, “I got a couple things I could have been very selfish about.” He pauses for a beat. “It’s probably for the best I wasn’t, though,” he finishes in a murmur.

I take a deep breath, nudging my head into his back without words.

“I sleep soundly with the decisions I’ve made in this life. When you’re old it seems most of what you do is look back, but don’t ever let that become you reevaluating your choices. The past is something to smile at, not pity and nitpick,” Coin says firmly.

I nod. “Understood.”

I feel him nod too. “Good.”

———

“Did your stupid ass tell Blackbeard who I am?” I demand, both of us sat criss-cross across from each other and playing Wild Wild West. We both smack our knees twice, then take our turn.

(Coin keeps insisting it’s called 007, but I learned this shit at my elementary school and I’ve never heard someone call it that, and I’m nothing if not obstinate.)

“Eddie, baby, I would never—” he denies, making a triumphant noise when we both reload at the same time. “I did try to kill the guy once, though. Got put in a second coma and everything.”

“Why would you do that?” I ask confusedly, both of us shielding at the same time. “I thought you said god threatened your ass?”

“I figured the benefit of him dying would outweigh the consequences,” he answers, staring intently at my hands as I reload and he shields again. “It didn’t work, obviously. And the coma thing threw Newgate offa holding a grudge, so the only actual consequence was that creepy fucker never coming near me again.”

“Well, he clearly thinks I’m a fortune teller and connected to you somehow. Maybe we’ve got the same murder face,” I suggest.

Coin frowns. “Hopefully it’s nothing more than that,” he mutters, groaning when once again I manage to get him with the finger guns while he’s reloading. “How do you always know when I’m not gonna use shield?!”

“You suck at this,” I say simply.

“Fuck this, we’re playing Chopsticks!”

———

“So is almost every story I’ve heard about you including you being plastered a personality trait or..?” I drawl, watching him tap my fingers with a raised eyebrow.

“I’M NOT AN ALCOHOLIC ANYMORE!” he shrieks before losing miserably, once again, at Chopsticks with a pained moan.

“Can you genuinely not count or something?” I ask flatly, trying not to analyse my relief at that too deeply.

“Screw you, we’re playing Rock Paper Scissors!”

_____

“Call Garp the Fister. Please. I need you to promise me,” Coin begs, weeping into his hands as he loses Rock Paper Scissors for the eighth time in a row.

“There’s no way you’re doing this on purpose,” I deadpan.

“Shut up! Fuck this, we’re doing Miss Mary Mack!”

_____

“I don’t really get it,” I confess, head pillowed in Coin’s lap while he leans down and lets me braid chunks of his hair.

“Get what?” he hums.

“Why nothing is *changing,”* I clarify.

Coin glances around at the silent night and back to me. “Seems pretty changed to me.”

I make a frustrated sound, finishing a braid and moving to another chunk and letting it slowly unravel itself. “But the story beats are still the same! Sure, the minutiae is different, but it’s still the same shit as the original.”

“Does that bother you?” he asks.

I sigh. “Most of it doesn’t. Just… this part in particular,” I grumble.

“Understandable. And you’ve done a lot to try and avoid it, right..?” he says slowly.

“No matter what I change and try to fix it’s like nothing budges! It’s like the timeline is healing itself around me, it’s like the universe itself wants me to fail!” I burst out, accidentally pulling on Coin’s hair.

“Ow.”

“Sorry.”

“I can guarantee you the universe doesn’t want you to fail,” he says imperiously. “At the very least, you’ve got a pseudo-god and the Sea who don’t want you to fail. I mean, look around,” he gestures to the open expanse of the ocean, “we’re almost there! We would *not* almost be there if the Sea wasn’t rooting for you.”

“Really?” I ask, tilting my head back to stare at the water.

“Yup. And I know she picks favourites,” he says matter-of-factly. “I mean just look at Buggy, the Sea *loves* his ass. He literally got tossed overboard once, but a wave hit the ship at just the right time to hurl him back up.”

I stare for a moment. *“Fuck,* that makes so much sense. How else would he have survived Luffy punting him off Orange Town?” I mutter to myself, then shake my head. “Back to my point! I *do not understand* why nothing is ‘for want of a nail’ing me in the ass.”

“Maybe that’s just not the way things work here,” Coin says simply. “Maybe fate’s a bitch. Maybe you’re just not changing the right things. There’s endless possibilities, but it stands that it starts with you. Change comes from you, and if you want things to change, you work for it.”

I take a deep breath, then let it out. “Alright,” I mumble. “Ok.”

I think about Ace and Luffy. I resolve not to fail them.

_____

The sun is just starting to tint the sky a pale shade of indigo when Coin suddenly announces “we’re almost there.”

I sit up from where I was lounging to look at him in anticipation.

“You may want to buckle up, we’re gonna rip through the Calm Belt and arrive on Amazon Lily faster than a motherfucker,” he advises, shifting back into the position he was when we set out and gesturing for me to sit in front of him again. “It’s for the best we spend as little time in open waters here as possible, so Pontiac isn’t gonna hold back.”

I scramble forward and grab on tight to the saddle. “How bad is this gonna suck?” I ask wearily.

“Oh it’s not that bad,” he dismisses. “I mean, if one of the colossal Sea Kings tries to eat us it might get a little bumpy, but I’ve got weird Haki remember? It *probably* won’t eat us.”

“Wait probably — ?”

“Here we go!” Coin interrupts.

I’m once again thrown back into his chest as we move at speeds that boggle my FUCKING MIND.

“HOLY FUCK!” I screech, then proceed to scream for the next five minutes straight.

Coin laughs like a maniac the whole time, leaning forward and gripping the reins tight. “Almost, almost, *almost and* — TIME!” he shouts as we slow down dramatically.

My eyes are rolling in my skull like a pinball machine, and I’m pretty sure we left a few of my vital organs a few hundred kilometers back. “Oh god,” I groan.

“And *that’s* a new record,” he says smugly. “Er — kid, you ok?”

“Gimme a moment,” I moan, hands pressed firmly to my eyes. “Oh god, let’s not do that part again.”

“Fair enough,” he sighs. “You might wanna get a look at this view, though. It’s pretty nice.”

I peek out between my fingers, then drop them entirely to stare in awe. *“Wow.* You think they carved those things themselves?” I ask, gesturing vaguely to the snake shaped rocks that arc over the mountain in the middle of the tree covered Isle of Women.

“Who knows?” Coin responds amusedly, patting the saddle. “Pontiac, how about you announce our arrival?” he calls. Pontiac makes a sound like a laugh, then raises her head further out of the water and opens her mouth. “You may want to cover your ears,” Coin suggests, doing just that. I race to comply.

I still hear the roar Pontiac lets out just as much as I feel the vibrations through my body. Well, that’s certainly one way to announce our presence.

“Was that a good idea?” I ask once it’s safe to lower my hands.

Coin laughs, then urges Pontiac closer to the island. “Oh yeah, definitely better to make sure they know we’re here before we waltz in. I’m gonna carry you inland, you alright with that?”

I nod my aescent, then Coin is scooping me up and jumping. I latch onto Coin’s shirt with a yelp, him laughing more as we land and he starts trotting along the rocky beach. “You’re the worst,” I state as he places me down.

“Nah,” he denies, smiling benevolently. “Man, it’s been forever since I’ve been here!”

“You’ve been before?” I ask idly, scanning the trees while I start fidgeting with my hands. Damnit, I just wanna go find Luffy.

“Yeah, a long while ago. Is it just me, or are the Kuja taking a while? Well, I guess it’s pretty early,” he comments. “I certainly wouldn’t be up at 5 if I could help it.”

I hum along distractedly.

“It’s a good thing that Momonga guy is the only one on the Marine ship who isn’t stone, otherwise that roar probably would have drawn some unwanted attention!” he keeps

rambling. “At least they’re on the opposite side of the island, and aren’t allowed to get anywhere close.”

“Cool,” I mumble absentmindedly.

“I feel like you’re not listening to me. Ah, whatever. Oh! There they are!” Coin announces.

There they are. The Kuja burst out of the jungle like panthers, snake/bow things drawn and aimed by caped and scantily clad women. I glance across each of the people that leap out to meet and surround us, but quickly go back to scrutinizing the jungle when none are who I’m looking for.

“Morning, ladies, is Hancock around? It’s kinda urgent,” Coin greets easily. “Yeesh, those are nice capes. I’ve been thinking about getting one myself, seems all the cool old dudes have them. Kid, what do you think?”

“Yeah. Capes are awesome,” I say inattentively.

My frustration grows as more Kuja arrive and yet *still,* the one person I’m here to see does not arrive. Coin is negotiating or something, or maybe the ladies are just threatening him, but no weapons are lowered or progress is made until a sharp voice cuts through the air.

“You,” an authoritative voice sneers, and then Boa Hancock arrives.

She strides forward on long legs, one poking out of the high slit in her ankle length skirt. Her black hair trails behind her in a way that has absolutely no right to look so perfect, golden snake earrings sparkling, with both hands planted firmly yet elegantly on her hips. Her dark eyes are narrowed at the pair of us behind eyelashes fit to kill, and a look of disdain on her obnoxiously gorgeous face.

“What are *you* doing here?” she demands, and yeah. Yeah I get it.

Hancock is undeniably breathtaking, nearly divine in her beauty and probably attractive past words. And it's not just in her face and figure, it's in her presence as all the Amazons stand down at her arrival. It's the way she holds herself like no one else has the right to exist as she does. She's stunning beyond stunning, but…

Jesus, I never thought being *too damn pretty* would be a dealbreaker for me.

"Hancock! Great to see you, ravishing as always," Coin greets, perfectly friendly despite her apparent hostility. "You been faring well? Keeping yourself busy?"

"Don't patronize me with your smalltalk, Leon D. Coin! State your business and announce your company!" she barks, looking at me like I'm a bug.

Don't love that, so I turn my attention back to the treeline. Coin is introducing me, and I automatically wave and say hi when I'm cued, but my eyes stay glued for any kind of movement. My foot taps impatiently on the ground.

Voices are raising, someone is upset, the Kuja looks ready to jump us, it's really all stuff I should probably be mentally checked in for, but I'm not. My fingers twitch against my thighs and I'm fighting the urge to just book it and track down my Captain myself.

I think someone might be pointing at me, or yelling to be honest, but I'm preoccupied by this sudden feeling that washes through me. It starts in the pit of my stomach, the palms of my hands and my knees, sparkly like anticipation and warm like being half asleep. It's in my bones and my nerves and burning across my skin like flashfire and—

Luffy bursts out of the trees.

Blue shirt and red shorts, armband still secure and hat still on his head, it doesn't matter. Wild eyes and overcome expression, sweat down his brow and clenched fists, it's just the same. Gaze darting around the gathering with fervor until they catch on me, already running for him like hell is on my heels—

“LUFFY!” I yell at the top of my lungs.

“ED!” he hollers back, breaking into a dead sprint straight at me.

We really weren’t that far apart, so when we fling ourselves at each other Luffy just ends up tackling me to the ground. I crash onto my back with a punched out ‘oof!’ but who really gives a shit when I have my Captain clinging to me like a limpet. I clutch at his back in a way that would scratch anyone else bloody, squeezing as tight as I possibly can.

I hadn’t realized just how much it had been building until the tension holding me together snaps like a guitar string, my composure shattering into a broken sob as my eyes start leaking in earnest.

Luffy has his head buried in my shoulder, so I feel it there as I do everywhere when he starts fervently bawling, tremors wracking through his entire body at the intensity. I try and hold him impossibly tighter, hands shaking and eyes squinting shut as I shove my face into his hair.

We just cry and clutch each other for a long moment, content to simply fall apart in each other’s arms after such a traumatic separation. It doesn’t *matter* that it was barely over a day, I don’t even have the words to describe the profound *ache* his absence left.

I thread my fingers tightly through the hair at the back of his head, idly noticing both our hats had flown off during our collision and are now resting on the ground beside us.

Luffy pulls back first, tears and snot smeared all over his face while he starts pressing kisses into every inch of mine. I start laughing through the tears, grabbing his face heedless of the mess and looking him over to make sure he isn’t hurt at all.

“Y — you ok?” I weep, sniffing hard with cheeks stinging from a mix of tears and smiling.

“Of course I’m ok, stupidhead!” he yells, tears still rolling down his face onto mine while I try in vain to wipe them away from his cheeks. “You’re good?!”

“Yeah, I’m good!” I laugh wetly, hoping this is the last time I cry this much during this godforsaken saga. “Thank you for waiting! I’m sorry I took so long!”

“You promised, of course I waited!” he chokes out, grabbing my shoulders and shaking. “You great big idiot, you goddamn buffoon!”

“You’re just repeating things I’ve called you!” I accuse, smearing my hands across his face and wiping them off on the ground before repeating the action.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t act as dumb as me! You’re the smart one for a reason!” he shoots back, scrubbing at my own face with his shirt.

We both haven’t stopped smiling for a second.

Chapter End Notes

Ed’s pirate era is soft found family and the power of friendship, but Coin's pirate era was just three guys being dudes on a boat living their best lives. Ed is living the plot of Avatar the Last Airbender but Coin was living the plot of Grown Ups. Three cheers for the Deep Dad Lore™

As promised, here's the full detailed look at Coin's tattoos. I've got a lot of mental illness and every single iota of it was used to pull those fucking things into existence. And because I've got mental illness to spare, here's art of the ED AND LUFFY REUNION WHOOOOOOP!!!

Every time Coin, absolute motherfucker, tried to fuck with canon it went a little like this;
God: Knock knock
Coin: Who's there?
God: Me

Coin: Me, who?
God: Me, who's about to knock knock a CONCUSSION INTO YOUR SKULL—

The 'I will try not to change anything' to 'WHY WON'T ANYTHING CHANGE' pipeline is so real.

Chapter 115: Chapter One Hundred and Fifteen: It’s Different For Girls

Chapter Summary

It’s Different for Girls - of Montreal

Hancock is just staring at the pair of us with this weird twitching expression on her face, somewhere between ‘overripe fruit’ and ‘drowning baby sea turtle.’ It’s a pretty interesting combination to strike a middleground with.

Chapter Notes

I DIDN'T WANT TO WRITE ANOTHER 5K GODDAMNIT Y'ALL ARE GONNA GET *SPOILED* AND THEN WHAT???

Hey what if I said the POV switch was next chapter. What then.

Back to the soul crushing grind of college this week, pray for me and my 3-4 HOUR CLASSES THAT RUN UNTIL 9PM AT THE LATEST, ONE OF WHICH IS ON A FRIDAY. WHAT THE FUCK. I HAVE AN HOUR OF PUBLIC TRANSIT AFTER THAT, IF THE AO3 WRITERS CURSE IS GONNA GET ME IT'S GONNA BE ON A BUS AT 10PM. REGISTRAR'S OFFICE WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON YOU—

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once me and Luffy are back on our feet, hats back on our heads and faces wiped dry, we notice the people who have been watching us the whole time.

The Kuja warriors, a large majority of which are surreptitiously wiping their eyes and sniffling, have all lowered their weapons and stand at ease. I’m pretty much wrung dry of excess emotions, so I really can’t make myself feel embarrassed about the spectacle we’ve made.

Hancock is just staring at the pair of us with this weird twitching expression on her face, somewhere between ‘overripe fruit’ and ‘drowning baby sea turtle.’ It’s a pretty interesting combination to strike a middleground with.

There's also Coin, who's watching us with this fond smile tinged with sadness and a hint of reminiscence I immediately feel bad for, regardless of why it's there.

Luffy has had a vice grip on my hand from the second we stopped hugging, so I drag him over to Coin by that. I grin maniacally between both of them, gesturing wildly at the older and shaking Luffy. "This is him! This is my guy!" I say excitedly.

Luffy gasps and points at him with his free hand. "Old shell man!"

Coin just throws his head back and laughs. "Hi, squirt! I really like your hat!" he cackles, reaching out and shaking Luffy's pointed finger.

"You're weird!" Luffy announces.

"And you're tiny, but we can't all be perfect," Coin says with a commiserating sigh.

Luffy turns to look at me, then to Coin, then back to me. "Yeah, ok," he nods, giving me a thumbs up.

"Approval!" I whoop, pulling both of them into another hug. Coin reaches up and smooshes both of our hats down our heads.

"Are you done wasting my time?" Hancock snaps from behind us. We all turn and stare at her, and one of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows twitches before she's looking away. "We do not have all day to stand here like beach umbrellas," she proclaims haughtily.

We continue to stare for another moment before Coin breaks the silence with a clap. "Welp! I'm gonna get me some grub and kick up my feet, it's been a loooong ride. See you inside!" he says cheerfully, just inviting himself to the palace or whatever as his ass jaunts off towards the jungle.

“That man,” Hancock mutters, glaring into the trees.

We stare after him for a beat. “Is there grub for me too? I’ve puked up like — three sandwiches since yesterday and I’ve had nothing but sea water, granola bars and jerky since then,” I blurt.

“Why were you eating sea water?” Luffy asks, nose scrunching.

“Some guys tried to drown me,” I say with a shrug. His face twists up into something infuriated, and I bump his hip with mine before looking to Hancock with my best puppy dog eyes. “So, food?”

“Yeah, food!” Luffy adds, putting his hands (and by extension mine) in the air.

Hancock is stone faced for a long second, then hangs her head. “Yes. Food,” she says, sounding miserable.

We both cheer, the rest of the Kuja cheer, and then the entire group of us are running after Coin.

———

“We need to go as soon as possible,” Luffy states as we walk through the city of Amazon Lily.

I stare wide-eyed at the architecture, the buildings jutting out of the deep valley in the centre of the mountain and lining the streets that lead to the palace. It’s all reminiscent of ancient China, and we’re gawked at by all of the women we pass on the way there.

“Agreed. I need to see about a couple things, and then we’re good to go,” I respond, trying to very pointedly keep my eyes off the… less than conservative clothing on the ladies everywhere.

“The food here is really good, and everyone is super weird, you’ll like it,” he declares, pulling me up the steps of the palace two at a time. “I ate a weird mushroom in the jungle that almost killed me, so that wasn’t great, but I also made some friends, so that’s good!”

“Do we need to have a talk about you not eating foreign vegetation again?” I ask sternly. “I thought you learned your lesson on Little Garden. Or at least with that conash that nearly broke your teeth on Skypiea.”

Luffy just shrugs, looking forward. “I knew what the first mushroom did, it was the rest that I probably shouldn’t have eaten,” he says, voice oddly inflectionless. I frown and squeeze his hand. He squeezes back.

“Snake Princess!” a woman’s voice screeches from inside, old and scratchy like she’s been screeching like that for a lot of her life. “Snake Princess, why is that man here?!”

Hancock, who’s been stalking up the steps ahead of us, doesn’t pause for a second for the woman. As me and Luffy reach the top I can see it’s Elder Nyon, I think her name is. She’s in the same garb as most of the other Kuja, a patterned two piece shirt/skirt combo and a cape, with wavy pale pink hair and a flower tucked behind her ear.

She’s also glaring and brandishing her purple snake staff thingy at where Coin is just kinda standing there. Not menacingly at all. He’s actually holding a hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing, the dick.

“C’mon Gloriosa, are you really still keeping that grudge?” he whines, looking like holding in that laugh is killing him slowly.

“Silence, heathen!” she screeches back. “Snake Princess, why have you allowed him into the palace?!”

“The better question is what are *you* doing in the palace?” Hancock shoots back, cutting between the two to continue marching towards the middle of the entrance hall.

“Snake Princess!” Nyon shrieks louder as Coin starts inching closer and playfully poking at the end of her staff while she waves it at him.

“Luffy! Is this that person you were waiting for?” another woman’s voice asks from behind us, and when we turn a young lady with a fluffy blond bob has come up with a smile splashed across her face.

“Yup! This is Ed!” Luffy introduces, waving my hand with his own. “Ed, this is one of the people who saved me from the mushrooms.”

I reach out my other hand with a smile. “Hi, it’s nice to meet you,” I laugh, shaking hers. “Thanks for taking care of my idiot, I know it’s not easy.”

“I’m Marguerite. And not at all, he saved my life in turn. I’m glad you came,” she returns sincerely, before cocking her head. “Are you a man too? You don’t really look like Luffy,” she asks with earnest confusion.

I smile and shake my head. “No, I’m not a man.”

Her head cocks the other direction. “So you’re a woman?”

“Nope, not a woman either,” I snicker.

Marguerite looks down at her hands with a look of cosmic bewilderment. “There’s more than those options in the outside world?” she whispers with dawning horror.

I throw my head back and laugh. “Don’t worry about it too much, you’ll give yourself a headache.”

“Is that why my sister’s powers didn’t work on you?” a different woman asks, this one I recognize as Boa Sandersonia — who I suddenly realize had been down by the shore with us and I just… didn’t notice. She tilts her large head at me with narrowed eyes, voluminous green hair spilling over her shoulders.

“What?” I ask in confusion. Did… did Hancock try to turn me to stone and I just *didn’t notice?*

“I’d like to know that as well,” the other sister, Boa Marigold mutters, standing imposing and large behind Sandersonia and tugging on an errant strand of ginger hair.

“Why didn’t they work on the man, either?” another warrior mumbles from the procession that followed us up.

I turn back to Coin, who seems to have stopped terrorizing Nyon and simply stands beside her with a pleasant smile. “I can count the amount of women I’ve been attracted to on one hand, and this chick half my age is certainly not one of them. Plus her dynamic with Rayleigh would make it weird,” he waves off.

Slay?

I look to Hancock, who is staring back with an unreadable expression. “Well? Why are you not stone,” she demands.

Oh this is gonna get my ass kicked, isn’t it?

I grimace and scratch the back of my neck. “Your personality is too much of an ick, I’m so sorry,” I rush out, trying very hard not to feel bad for saying that about a woman who kicks

puppies. It could, of course, also be because I was thoroughly distracted by my husband, but c'est la vie. Here's to hoping she doesn't test the theory.

There's a moment of silence, and then Hancock is dramatically falling back onto her snake while Coin bursts out laughing and all the women around us gasp.

"Hey can we get food now? I'm hungry," Luffy asks, ignoring the commotion as Hancock rights herself and stares at me with this expression I do NOT have the mental faculties to decipher. I don't think it looks very happy, though.

She makes a strangled sound, burying her face in her hand.

"I'd like food too. Oh, but kid you said you had some things to go over," Coin pipes up, also ignoring everything except for scooting a step to the side every time Nyon starts to inch away from him. At least he's enjoying himself?

"Yeah, organizing how the next week is gonna go is a priority. Right up there with getting me some breakfast," I decide. "There's a lot of moving pieces floating around, we'd be idiots to go into anything so unorderly."

"What we need to do is plan," Coin says with a firm nod of his head.

Both me and Coin swivel our heads to Hancock. "Do you have a war room?" we ask in unison, sparkles in both our eyes.

Hancock looks to the ceiling like she's beseeching the lord for patience. "Yes. Food. War room," she squeezes out.

Yeah I don't have it in me to feel bad.

_____

We go to the war room, which is just something they have.

The group has been narrowed down to just me, Luffy, Coin, the Gorgon sisters and Nyon — who tries to stay as far away from Coin as possible and fails miserably because he seems to find fucking with her hilarious. A young lady had brought in a huge platter of various foods that she left on the circular table monopolizing the majority of the room, and then we were left to ourselves.

“First order of business, getting into Impel Down itself,” I start around a mouthful of… something. I really have no idea what it is, but it tastes great so I’m not gonna bother asking.

“I have agreed to accept the World Government’s summons, by your request, under the condition of a visit to the prison,” Hancock states, pointedly speaking to Luffy and ignoring everyone else. Her sisters don’t look overjoyed at the prospect, but don’t dispute it.

“Alright, great. Is there a plan for how sneaking us on board and inside will work?” I ask, more amused by her disregard of my presence than anything.

“You shall be concealed in my clothing. You will not be discovered,” she says firmly.

“Cool, great. I’m assuming the prison will make you submit to a full body search and probably insist on Seastone or something, since you’re a pirate and all,” I continue.

“I will handle it,” she asserts. Fair enough.

“You know, me and Shanks once snuck into the Reverie by dressing him up as a girl. Impel Down may have the best security the WG has to offer, but in general their security is always *shit,”* Coin says lightly.

I pause for a second before spinning on him with my jaw dropped. “THAT WAS *YOU?!”* I shriek.

“You know Shanks?” Luffy asks excitedly. “Wait — I knew that. Nevermind.”

Coin blinks at us twice. I shake my fist at him. “You son of a fuck, you’re the one who got Queen Titi of Alabasta to vouch for you because Shanks made a convincing *Princess Ariel?!”* I extrapolate.

He bursts out laughing. “HAH! Yeah, yeah that was us. In our defense, there was a bet with *a lot* of money riding on it.”

“That man,” Hancock mutters in unison with Nyon before they’re both glaring at each other.

“Nightmare man,” I agree, heaving a heavy sigh and shaking my head. This is something to dissect later.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the parchment paper me and Sabo had drawn on, flattening it on the table. I open my mouth to ask for a writing utensil, but Coin is already handing me a pen. At least Luffy is latched onto my left hand this time, so it won’t look like everything was written by a toddler.

“Ok, Sabo and the RA are on top of intercepting Ace if we fail in there, as well as whatever they’re doing at Marineford. He’s also organizing the Whitebeards, hopefully, so we have nothing to worry about but what’s in front of us,” I mutter, using the empty space on the paper to sketch out the outline of Impel Down larger than the ugly little thing already there.

“You have the RA on this? Nice,” Coin praises, absolutely tearing through this… I don’t know. It’s like if an omelette was a burrito was a dumpling was a crepe.

“Thank you, I’m incredibly good at what I do,” I say imperiously. “Ace of course is the priority, so as long as everyone involved tries their damn best, *something’s* gotta give. And

I'll do what I have to do so his ass doesn't get Rengoku'd."

Coin jokes on his omelette/burrito/dumpling/crepe.

"Who?" Hancock sneers, looking at my drawing like it's personally offended her entire bloodline.

"Don't worry about it," I wave off. "Anyone wanna take a stab at how many levels are in Impel Down?"

"Five," Nyon answers immediately.

I make a loud incorrect buzzer sound. "Nope, it's six," I say, splitting my shape into as many sections, with an extra thick line between Levels 5 and 6. "Level 6 is where they keep the big baddies, that's where Ace is gonna be and that's where they'll take you, Hancock."

"You will address her as Snake Princess!" Marigold interjects, looking incredibly displeased.

"My apologies, Princess," I correct easily. "I'm going off my shitty memory here, but I'm preeetty sure this is the floor order," I continue, scrawling out the levels or whatever I remember them as. "There's the Mean Red Forest of Knives, Petting Zoo on MDMA, Desert Hellscape Round 2, Cook Your Darlings in the Boiling Pot of Doom, Canada but Worse, and the previously stated Level 6."

"Why is Level 6 the only one with a normal name?" Sandersonia mumbles.

"Because I don't give enough of a fuck to remember any of their real names," I deadpan. "Anyway, we've got pure unbridled insanity on our side so I'm not willing to bother with a plan that'll be immediately thrown out the window."

“You’re a fucking genius,” Coin chokes out, hand over his eyes so I can’t tell if he’s crying, laughing or both.

“I really am. Princess, have you already called Momonga and let him know you’re answering the summons?” I ask.

She narrows her eyes at me. “You know his name?”

Oops. “I recognized his signature when we pulled up,” Coin says easily, wiping his face off (it was laugh and crying) and hip checking me. “I remember him from when he was a shrimp. He was on God Valley, actually. Good times,” he muses wistfully. Nyon smacks him in the lower back with her snake *hard.*

“He was also one of the Vice Admirals in the Enies Lobby Buster Call,” I add, hip checking Luffy in turn.

Luffy frowns. “I don’t like him already.”

“But he *is* gonna sneak us into prison, albeit unknowingly, so whatever,” I sigh, passing Luffy a handful of bacon so I can grab an omelette/burrito/dumpling/crepe for myself.

“He is also expecting us within the hour, though personally I don’t care about making him wait,” Hancock interjects, sharp eyes on me. “I had already called before your arrival.”

I nod. “We won’t be much longer, then. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry this is forcing your hand with the World Government,” I say truthfully. Hancock’s face morphs into this weird expression like she can’t decide how to react to that. “Though, this whole fucking mess is Blackbeard’s fault and I’m more sorry you’ll have to even *look* at the fucker when you get there,” I add sourly. Luffy scowls beside me.

“Fuckin’ hate that guy,” Coin mutters under his breath. We immediately fist bump.

“He’ll be a problem, obviously, and one I want out of the way,” I continue, frowning at the parchment paper.

“What makes this man so despicable?” Nyon questions. I’m suddenly realizing they had to bring her in a stool so she could see onto the table. “Beyond his hand in Ace’s capture, that is.”

“He’s so *gross,”* I groan. “Also he wants to kidnap me? Dunno if he still wants Luffy since he’s already a Warlord. Either way, don’t love that. But generally he’s the capital W Worst and is like, tryna pull a Rocks 2.0 or something.”

Nyon scoffs. “That scrub wouldn’t know the first thing about being a Rocks Pirate, I don’t care that he spent time with Whitebeard.”

I raise my eyes from the paper with furrowed brows, then glance to Coin, who looks like he’s trying not to laugh again. “Why do I feel like I just said something terribly ironic?”

“You did,” Coin declares. I frown, slowly looking between him and Nyon and the way she keeps shooting him glares.

Wait. Wait wait wait.

GRUDGE. GOD VALLEY. ***MOTHERFUCKER.***

“Oh god, *wait, WHAT?!”* I shriek, pointing to her with my jaw wide open. “You — hold on, pump the brakes, slow all the rolls — tell me you weren’t a Rocks Pirate, I need you to say I’m wrong, *please,”* I beg.

Coin has collapsed onto the table in a fit of giggles and cackles, smacking his hand down while Nyon huffs. “It was a lifetime ago, nothing to get worked up over now,” she grumbles.

“Wait, the old lady was a pirate?!” Luffy gasps, leaning in front of me to stare at Nyon.

“Ah, Gloriosa was pretty famous back then!” Coin wheezes, still face down on the table laughing hysterically. “Fuck those guys! Fuck ‘em!”

Nyon wacks him over the head with her snake staff. “Shut up, you terrible man!” she shrieks, hitting him twice more for good measure.

The Boa sisters watch the display with unreadable expressions.

“Oh my god,” I moan into my hands. “Why are you fuckers everywhere? I already beat the shit out of Captain John’s zombie, isn’t that enough?”

“Wait really?” Coin asks, lifting his face from the table and putting his head out of hitting range for Nyon.

“That… is honestly not shocking,” she mutters, stroking her wrinkled chin.

“It’s painfully on brand, actually,” Coin mumbles, rubbing his goose egg.

“Can we get back on track?” Hancock demands.

I smear mine and Luffy’s hand down my face and heave a breath. “Jesus Christ. Yeah, ok, back on track,” I mutter, picking at my lip and crossing the one I’m sharing with Luffy over my stomach to rest my elbow on it. My eyes trace over the makeshift map with a furrowed brow.

How can I get Blackbeard off the game board *without* relegating someone we absolutely need fighting to deal with him? His ass *cannot* be allowed to do whatever he wants, and I don’t

know what would happen if we ran into him on our way out of Impel Down like in canon, given his… interest in me. All the players that could deal with him are needed on Marineford —

Wait. Could that work..?

“Let’s make it the Marines problem,” I say in sudden revelation, dropping my hand from my mouth with my gaze on the drawing of Marineford.

“What?” Hancock snaps.

“Make the Marines deal with it,” I repeat, pulling my eyes up to meet hers. “There’s no need to spare the manpower if we’re using the enemy’s resources. Two birds, one stone. That would mean not only no Blackbeard to interfere, but less Marines to cut through on Marineford itself.”

Hancock blinks once, slowly, before tilting her head in a sharp nod.

“How will you accomplish this? Blackbeard is one of their Warlords, they will not attack him without provocation,” Nyon asks, frowning.

“Then we give them provocation,” I answer simply.

“What’s your plan, kid?” Coin questions, mouth quirking up.

I still haven’t looked away from Hancock. “Princess, was the Snail you called Momonga on white?”

Her face twists up like I just called her mother something terribly unsavoury. “You wish to know if we have access to a White Transponder,” she states flatly.

“Yes,” I confirm.

“And you wish to use such a device to… convince the Marines to turn on one of their Warlords,” she continues.

“I do,” I acknowledge.

“And you expect this privilege to be granted to you simply on account of asking?” she says coldly.

Ah. There it is.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Luffy’s face fold into a frown, and he leans forward like he’s going to interrupt, so I squeeze his hand. He pauses, then settles back onto his heels.

“It’s not for the use of the likes of *you,”* she carries on when I don’t respond. “I think you forget yourself and your position here. You do not have unmitigated access to our resources or room to negotiate. It is not advantageous for me to help you.”

“Snake Princess, mind your manners,” Nyon scolds.

Hancock doesn’t remove her gaze from mine, but holds a hand up in a command for silence. “I am the Empress of Amazon Lily, the ruler of the country you find yourself in. You are a guest in my land, breaking one of our sacred rules by virtue of existing,” she hisses in disdain. “You have entered my home without invitation and you have the *gall* to make demands of me?”

“I’ve made no demands of you,” I assert. “I’ve asked you a question, and answered your own, and you’ve made assumptions of my character and temperament of your own accord.”

Hancock glowers at me, and somehow doesn't get any uglier. "This is the Isle of Women, and it is a friend to *women.* By your own admission you are not one, and if you are not a woman then you are an enemy of us," she hisses.

I take a deep calming breath and a moment to collect myself, and by that I mean I fucking lunge at her with all the grace of a feral alley cat. Luffy and Coin are immediately yanking me back off the table. "Lemme at her—" I squawk, trying to wriggle out of their hold as I'm spun away from her smug fucking face.

Coin shoves a piece of meat in my mouth and starts squeezing down my shoulders and arms. "You really shouldn't get so riled up, it's bad for your blood pressure," he advises. "C'mon, deep breaths now."

I chew angrily.

"You want me to yell at her? I'll fight her too," Luffy offers, tilting his head.

I take those advised deep breaths, roll my shoulders and crack my neck, then shake my head. "Nope. Ok, I'm good," I insist. Coin and Luffy exchange a look over my head, then slowly spin me back around to the table.

Hancock is still looking terribly self-satisfied, heedless of the disapproving look Nyon is giving her. "That temper — truly unfeminine of you. If there were any doubts on your alignment, they've certainly been assuaged," she drawls haughtily.

I don't fly off the handle this time, which is a good first step. I try to keep in mind just how hard she could kick my ass, not that it would really stop me.

"Princess," I begin evenly, "I'd like to formally beseech use of your White Transponder with the intent to deal with Blackbeard. Would you please grant me this request?" I implore, dipping my head into a bow for good measure.

There's a beat or two of silence, and then—

"No," Hancock says loftily.

I slowly pick my head up from my bow. "May I ask why?" I say carefully.

"Do I need to give you a reason? I could deny you simply because I feel like it. I could dispose of the snail, I could deport you from the island, I could even kill you right where you stand. And you know why the world will forgive me anyway?" she asks cavalierly, shoulders set with absolute confidence. "Because I am beautiful."

This *bitch.*

I plant my feet and glare at her. *"Boa Hancock.* There are real actual lives at stake here, possibly even your own people if Blackbeard continues unchallenged," I say shortly, trying not to go fully apoplectic on her. "If you insist on standing in my way at every turn we are going to have a massive problem. Fair warning, the last woman of royal status I said that to got punched in her *fucking mouth."*

"Ooooh boy," Coin mutters under his breath beside me.

"What was that?" Hancock asks lowly.

"You're being contrary just to be contrary, and frankly it's below you," I snap. "I'm asking for help because someone I care about very much is in danger, and you're treating it as a goddamn *pettiness contest!* I'm not your enemy because I'm not a woman, and I'm not going to forgive you if Ace dies due to your inaction because your ***fucking face is nice!"*** I finish with a shout.

There's a prolonged and lingering second of stunned silence.

“Damn,” Coin whistles, breaking it without concern.

Hancock stares at me long and hard, expression still as stone. I hold her gaze unflinchingly.

“...Elder Nyon, fetch the Transponder,” she says after an extended moment.

I feel my entire face go lax. Hancock looks off to the side, brow furrowed as she tilts her features away. “...Thank you,” I say, quiet and sincere. She ever so slightly inclines her head.

Both of her sisters are looking back and forth between us, bewildered and gap-mouthed. I turn to Luffy and he gives me a big grin and a thumbs up. Coin does the exact same.

I really don’t think that should have worked.

———

Nyon places the White Transponder on the table in front of me with an unreadable expression, not even reacting to Coin when he makes faces at her as she returns to her previous spot.

“You may make your call. We need to leave very soon if we want to stay on schedule,” Hancock says, tone blank and even.

I nod, reaching for the receiver. “Understood, thank you.” She makes a face at the thanks, and I dial in Jonah’s number.

There’s a long beat of ringing in the otherwise silent room, and then the call connects with a familiar click. “Hello?” Jonah’s voice groans, sounding exhausted and fucking done.

“It’s me,” I say simply.

The resigned expression on the snail’s face snaps to shock so fast I worry about its facial muscles. Jonah lets out a colourful list of expletives as the background fills with shuffling and a distant crash, then the slam of a door and a dull thud.

“You son of a *bitch,* what the *fuck* happend to you?!” he yells, sounding both relieved and incensed. “The papers are saying your entire crew got fucking obliterated off Sabaody, and Marineford is a goddamn *nightmare* — and who’s this random guy you gave my number to?! I have so many things to scream at you about!”

“They’re gonna have to wait, I’m on a lethal time crunch,” I say, much more serious than I normally am with him.

He obviously picks up on it, the snail’s mouth flattening out into a straight line. “Copy. What do you need?” he asks, immediately on point.

I glance around the table. Everyone listens intently. “Well, I’ve got a pretty big ask for you,” I start. “First, you did give the guy who called you what he needed, yeah?”

“Yup, with the message and him having the number in the first place, I figured it was legit and you were serious about me owing you. He has all the secret passages I know, and Fergus is on top of getting him any and all codes and ID’s he could possibly need,” Jonah explains.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Good. Thank you, Jonah.”

The snail makes a face. “Stop being sincere, it’s weird,” he mutters. “Go back to the stupid pet names and ridiculous humor.”

I crack a smile. “Aw, baby, did you miss me?” I croon.

“No. Shut up,” he spits, definitely smiling.

“Does he mean Sabo?” Luffy questions out the corner of his mouth, probably trying to be quiet but failing spectacularly. I roll my eyes and nod anyway.

“Who’s that?” Jonah asks confusedly.

“Sorry, I’m here with Luffy and a couple other people. You’ve got a bit of an audience,” I say apologetically.

“It’s whatever,” he sighs. “Now what can I do to help you?”

I take a deep breath. “I need you to take Blackbeard off the gameboard for me,” I request. The snail’s little jaw drops. “He’s gonna abandon his post before the fighting starts, steal a Marine ship and hit Impel Down, and he’s got a list of Level 6 prisoners he plans to break out. Then, yaknow, a lot of people are gonna die.”

“Oh sweet god,” Jonah wheezes. “That is *so* not what I thought you were gonna say AT ALL.”

“I’m counting on you, Jonah. You play this however you think is best, just make sure the Marines stop him. This is priority number one. But like also don’t let them up security at the prison because we’re about to bust in and that would be *really* awkward,” I say with a nervous laugh.

There’s a second of no sound, then Jonah lets out this broken groan of pure fucking despair. “I am begging on my hands and knees for you to be kidding.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“Fuck.”

“I have the utmost faith in you. Save some fucking lives, Marine,” I command.

“How the hell do I do that?!” Jonah shrieks.

“Convince them,” I order, giving him a wide grin full of teeth.

“You motherfucker,” Jonah weeps. “I’ll do my best, but know I’m gonna *cry about it.”*

“That’s all I ask. Godspeed,” I finish.

“Copy,” he croaks.

The snail is hung up with a definitive click.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys I love Jonah have I mentioned that lately? I love him to bits.

Canon: White Transponders are incredibly rare and only one has been shown and Dragon has it
Me: Yeah well what if I gave one to everyone I want to because I can? Huh??? What then??????

Let's hear it for trans inclusive misandry whoooooop! Boa Hancock the way you are so interesting and complex... terribly sexy of you. I had more fun with her than I thought I would tbh.

I have no proof whatsoever but I live firmly in the reality where the 'love sickness' is actually just these Empresses being forced to drastically change their worldview or make a decision that goes against a lot of their beliefs and it shocking their systems something FIERCE, and it getting mislabeled as love sickness because them being from

where they're from means that system shock often comes from a completely foreign outside influence (i.e. a MAN) and being confronted with that for the first time. And yes sometimes it's love, and maybe sometimes it's not, but at its centre it's just ladies not knowing how to cope with a reality shift when its catalyst leaves, and just dying about it because why the hell not. Staunch believer that love changes you and that change is something you gotta foster if you don't want it to get out of control, right here. My lady love Hancock having her Zuko moment and falling ill from doing 1 (one) good deed and having 1 (one) good emotion is just terribly relatable content, ok? Aight rant over, back to the reality where none of that is even remotely true.

Chapter 116: Chapter One Hundred and Sixteen: The Strength To Find Another Way

Chapter Summary

Come Back Home - Two Door Cinema Club

Jonah is going to do his best, but he’s gonna cry about it. Or, at least, he’ll cry when this is over.

Chapter Notes

School might kill me. Genuinely. I haven't even had a full week of classes yet and it's already kicking my ass so hard.
...You know maybe the self-imposed semi-isolation I've been rocking with for the past four months is biting me in the ass. Who could have possibly seen this coming?

Anyway Sarah Kinsley's debut album finally dropped and you should all go listen to it because it fucking SLAPS.

Catch me in the corner ✨experimenting✨ with the POV switching. We jumpin' RIGHT into that shit.

I'm just gonna keep making shit up about how the Marines and Marineford work, ok? Ok.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jonah is going to do his best, but he’s gonna cry about it. Or, at least, he’ll cry when this is over.

Walking through the halls of Marineford is nothing short of nerve wracking, a week out from Fire Fist Ace’s execution date. The island is crawling with the Marines’ best and brightest, and a fair share of them have taken to just hanging out along the exact route Jonah has to take to get back to his office.

So, you know. Fuck that.

Jonah eases out of the janitorial closet he's taken to stowing away in whenever he's this side of his unit's wing and his original Transponder from home rings, not the standard issue one he had received upon his transfer to the Navy headquarters. That, or whenever fucking *Grant* starts rambling about the girl who works at a bar in the city he wants to ask out.

The hall is blessedly empty, but he knows that won't last for more than a few minutes. That's more than enough time for Jonah to duck behind the large heavy tapestry of some Fleet Commander he can't remember the name of, though.

The secret passageways of Marineford barely feel like passageways at all. They have the same tiling and paint as nearly every single other hallway in the 'newer' sections of the base, the ones lacking the tatami and fusuma typically reserved for higher ranking officers, and only the random halls without any lighting would give someone pause.

The biggest difference is the stark lack of windows and ugly portraits and plaques whatever interior decorator who worked on this place clearly had a hard-on for. That and the fact that taking a single wrong turn in the goddamn labyrinth of halls could land you anywhere on the base except where you want to be, and the entire place is caked in dust.

Luckily, Jonah hasn't had to painstakingly trial-and-error his way through the disused halls, he's had a mentor to hammer the routes into his head.

Two rights, a left down the short hall with the flickering lights before another left, then a nail biting sprint down the unlit hallway to the right that is *way* too damn long for its own good followed by one last left. If Jonah ever manages to find the guy who designed these tunnels, it's over for them.

Jonah is nearly out of the nightmare hall when someone slams into him from an adjoining passage. He nearly unsuccessfully tamps down the girlish scream that tries to leave his mouth before the other person curses in a smooth British accent.

"You scared the shit out of me!" he hisses, smacking the other person.

There's a dull clicking sound, and suddenly the hall is illuminated by the small flickering flame of a lighter. The sheepish face of the man who he had told about these tunnels over Transponder call — Sabo, as he had introduced himself — gives him an apologetic smile.

"I'm really sorry," he chuckles, artificial eye all but glowing in the dim light.

"I don't want you to be sorry, I want you to *stop running into me,"* Jonah pleads. This is the third time since the man had arrived, once more and he's gonna start thinking it's on purpose. Jonah has only *been* in the damn passage three times since the guy got here!

"I'm seriously not doing it on purpose," Sabo says with a kicked-puppy look. *This fucking guy.*

"I got word from Ed. They're with Strawhat and about bust into prison or something," he sighs, pinching his nose bridge.

"Luffy's alright?" Sabo reaffirms.

"Yeah, he sounded fine," Jonah confirms. "Now stop trying to ambush me in dark halls or I'm gonna start carrying pepper spray."

"It was an accident!" Sabo calls after him as he starts booking it down the final stretch of the cursed fucking hallway.

Jonah pokes his head out the alcove where the bust of some Admiral with a stupid haircut sits in front of an identical painting of the man, and when the coast appears clear, exits the warren and beelines for the office.

The department the Intel and Bounty Division had been relocated to was… smaller than Jonah would have liked. The IBD had been in an overhaul for years, hence the main base of its operations being in *Loguetown,* and it seems even their transfer wasn't enough to get the bureaucracy to finish the damn thing up.

They had just been shoved in the wing with Division 4, who had been liaising all the information between them and Marinford. The upside is Straussberger finally bought Jonah the drink he owed him, the downside is it's very *cramped.*

Because the renovations on the rest of the wing had been in progress for fucking years, the lot of them are stuffed between the only two department spaces the base managed to get done in that time. The only people with offices of their own were Jonah's Division's Lieutenant, a Lieutenant in Division 3 from the South Blue, and the Commodore who had already been settled in here.

Jonah enters the department with his hands stuffed deep in his pockets, hoping that'll keep them from shaking. Fergus yawns a greeting from his desk — the one pushed up against the back of his own — and Grant gives him an odd look, probably wondering why he's back after just saying he was gonna take a coma length nap because he worked through the night. *Again.*

He ignores them both and marches right for the office of Commodore Jean-Rousseau.

Fergus immediately notices something is off, straightening up and leaving his seat with a glint in his eyes despite working the graveyard shift. Grant straightens up as well, looking confused by Fergus's behaviour.

Jonah knocks sharply on the Commodore's door. There's a brief pause from the voice he heard inside before the click of a call ending sounds and the Commodore calls for him to enter. Jonah pushes the door open and barely bothers to do more than kick it half-closed behind him.

"Sir, I've received urgent information that requires your attention posthaste," he says crisply, stood at attention besides his hands still tucked in his pockets.

The Commodore finishes tucking a sheaf of paper into his desk and stares evenly at him with dark violet eyes. He's an imposing man, tall and broad even with his coat thrown over a chair in the corner. His dull purple hair is swept back under a Navy visor cap, with the long braid tied with a blue ribbon draped over his shoulder.

“Is that so? May I know the source of this information?” he asks, cadence smooth despite the grit that seems perpetually stuck in the back of his throat. One of his hands smoothes across his thick moustache.

“No, sir,” Jonah responds, already tensing up in anticipation of his superior’s reaction. He’s not an unpleasant man by any means, he’s been downright helpful with the entire transfer, but the sabre that rests against his desk is definitely not for show.

But… Jonah owes this to Ed. Jonah *won’t* make their faith misplaced.

There’s a quiet gasp behind him, and he immediately knows half the office must be peeking in the doorway to watch this.

The Commodore raises a single eyebrow. “Oh? Well, let’s hear the information then,” he invites, thin eyes creasing.

Jonah blinks, not expecting that to have actually worked. “Blackbeard has intentions to abandon his post, and appropriate a ship on his way out.”

The Commodore’s other eyebrow raises. “Blackbeard, who *just* became a Warlord by handing over Fire Fist Ace and is the reason Marineford is in such a fuss? He plans to abandon his post?” he repeats.

Jonah takes a deep breath. “Yes, sir.”

“And the source of this information, you trust it?” he presses.

“With my life, sir,” Jonah responds, a litany of *do it for Ed, do it for Ed* playing in his mind.

The Commodore strokes his moustache again. “Is that so… And you will not disclose your informant?”

“No, sir,” Jonah repeats. *Do it for Ed.*

“Jonah, what are you doing?” he hears Fergus hiss in a whisper from the door. He doesn’t acknowledge it.

The Commodore heaves a sigh. “Be that as it may, Fire Fist Ace’s execution is the priority. The Marines simply don’t have the time to deal with an issue like this,” he states, holding eye contact.

“Sir?” Jonah says slowly.

“One rogue Warlord is nothing the Fleet Commander or one of the Admirals won’t be able to handle,” he says smoothly. “Frankly, this information isn’t worth their attention. Pirates being pirates is something they’re already looking out for. Fire Fist Ace’s execution is the priority.”

Jonah feels something crack. *Do it for Ed.*

“Sir, are you telling me the lives of innocent civilians — that we are duty bound to protect — are less important than executing some pirate so we can start a war with an Emperor, sir?” he snaps.

There’s a chorus of sharp inhales from the door. Jonah idly realizes that’s the first time he’s *ever* spoken out of turn with a superior.

The Commodore blinks at him, once, twice. “One more time, Marine?” he prompts, tone not betraying anything.

“Are the lives Blackbeard may take with a *Marine ship* worth less than the life of a single pirate and a pointless and, frankly, *brainless* war with Whitebeard?” Jonah repeats, slow and purposeful and just a step back from snarling.

The Commodore stares him down for a infinitesimal moment, air static and Jonah’s palms drenched in sweat.

But still. Jonah does not stand down. *Do it for Ed.*

Time stretches on like a rubberband, going taught and snapping as the Commodore lets out a loud bellowing laugh. Jonah startles, back jerking straighter and his hands yanking out of his pockets.

“Sir..?” he squeaks out.

The Commodore slaps a hand on his desk and gets a hold of himself, wiping under his eyes. A smile stretches out from under his moustache. “Very well, Master Chief Petty Officer,” he chuckles. Jonah starts even harder at the title, blinking stupidly at the man. “Let’s go and see Vice Admiral Garp, then. This is important information to pass on.”

Jonah blinks rapidly before snapping into a salute. “Yes sir!”

Commodore Jean-Rousseau stands from his desk and gestures for Jonah to exit while he reaches for his coat and sabre. Jonah spins on his heel and speedwalks toward the door.

Grant is in the doorway, slack jawed because he’s never seen Jonah be anything less than chill, and Fergus is right in front of him with a shit eating grin because he's been fucking *waiting* for Jonah to snap. He could feel the repressed rage, he could fucking *feel it* .

Jonah gives both of them sharp warning glances, and they throw themselves around the corner and out of the doorframe.

Jonah takes a deep breath as he exits the office, shaking his hands out.

Yeah, convince them, easy as pie.

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Down in the Amazon Lily port, Luffy is saying goodbye to his new friends, making sure to always stay in line of sight with me while I stay back with Coin. I smile at him as he perches on the nose of one of the giant snakes that pulls the Perfume Yuda.

“Make sure to tell Buggy I say hi, and don’t get caught, and try and stay away from Megallan, and do your best, and stay the *fuck* away from Akainu obviously, and remember to ask for permission to board before your boots touch deck on Newgate’s ship, and look out for your boy, and keep yourself safe—”

Coin has been rambling like this the entire time. I reach up and smack my hand onto his cheek with an exasperated look. “Coin. I’m gonna be fine,” I assure. “I’m a certified badass at this point, you don’t have to worry so much.”

He heaves a big dramatic sigh. “Kid, I’d be worrying if you were built like a brick wall and invincible. Just… stay alive, please?” he asks, taking my hand and holding it over his chest. “I want to actually get to know you, don’t take that away from me.”

I give him a big smile. “I’m already not allowed to die, there isn’t anything out there that could keep me down for long.”

Coin shakes his head, expression fond as he migrates his hands to my shoulders and squeezes. “I believe you, then. And hey, if you want to freak this shit out of Sengoku, tell him the Sea won’t side with him. The sentiment at the very least will piss him off.”
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I chuckle. “Yeah, ok. I wanna see if I can make all his hair turn white in the middle of the fight.”

“Kid,” Coin says, suddenly serious. I stop laughing to straighten up instinctively. “You understand why I can’t go, right?” I nod. “If I thought I would be able to help you in any way, I’d have it done in a heartbeat. I’m sorry I can’t do more for you.”

“You got me here, that’s more than enough,” I deny. “This is our era and our responsibility. *Thank you* for delivering me to my Captain.”

Coin beams down at me, then takes my face in both hands so he can press another warm, lingering kiss into the skin of my forehead. “I’ll be waiting right here for you when you’re done,” he promises, not moving an inch. “I wish you nothing but the best of luck.”

When he finally pulls back, there’s so much adoration bleeding out of his eyes I shove my head into his chest just to get away from it. Coin laughs, sturdy arms coming up to wrap me in a tight hug that feels a little like being enfolded head to toe in a weighted blanket.

“Thank you,” I whisper again, hoarse and unfaltering.

Coin pushes one more kiss into my temple, then bodily spins me around by the shoulders, sticks my hat on my head, and shoves me towards the boat. I grin at him over my shoulder as Luffy’s hand stretches out to grab mine and he hauls me up onto the snake with him.

Luffy smiles at me with a raised eyebrow, and I tilt my head to the side and poke him on the nose. His eyes narrow and he juts his chin out, so I squish his cheeks together. He scrunches up his face, so I stick out my tongue at him.

There’s a second of intense eye contact, then we’re both nodding self-satisfiedly and turning back to the girls Luffy had been talking to. The three of them — Marguerite, the giant girl and the one with the pigtails — just kinda stare at us like we’re a Monet they got too close to.

“What?” Luffy asks.

“It was like communication, but also wasn’t…” the girl with the pigtails whispers in fascination.

“Is he telepathic..?” the giant girl mumbles, looking at her hands like the universe is collapsing.

“Can all men speak with their faces like that?” Marguerite questions.

“What?” I’m the one to ask this time.

“You guys are so weird!” Luffy laughs. “I’ll come back someday with my friends so you can meet them all! Uh — if that’s alright..?”

“I don’t know how Sanji would fare here,” I mutter, sucking on my teeth.

“I’m sure we can make exceptions for friends of yours, right?” Marguerite chuckles.

A murmur rises up through the crowd and we all turn as Hancock finally arrives from the detour she made and… kicks a whole baby seal and puppy on the way over. I… man, what the fuck. I don’t even *like* puppies, but just… what the *fuck?*

“Snake lady!” Luffy greets with a smile, waving our conjoined hands. “Sorry to rush you, but we’re in a super big hurry!”

“Luffy, you have to call her Snake Princess!” Marguerite admonishes nervously.

Hancock averts her eyes, stone faced for a moment as she steps onto the head of the other snake and is brought to our level. Then her face is going pink, and she holds one of her cheeks with a bashful smile. “Please, call me Hancock,” she mumbles shyly.

“Sure thing, hammock!” Luffy responds cheerfully. I choke on a snort and she levels a withering glare at me.

“I didn’t say anything,” I rush out, covering my mouth with my hand so she can’t see me smiling. “Sorry Princess, let’s get going.”

“Yes, let’s,” she strangles out, torn violently between fawning over Luffy and strangling me.

“Woooo! Let’s goooo!” Luffy hollers.

_____

The less said about Boa Hancock smuggling us onto a Marine ship beneath her dress, the better.

_____

This is so ridiculously and utterly stupid, I might just fall over and die on the spot.

The Boy — who should NOT be a boy what the FUCK is up with THAT — has been staring at me nonstop since he woke up, and it’s starting to get a little fucking awkward.

“Can you knock that off?” I hiss, glaring down at him.

*He continues staring, making no effort to conceal it or to get up. Not that he **could,** he's laid on his back on **my** fucking bedroll and running a fever that could probably cook his insides out, and tied up with a vine for… safety reasons.*

I dunk my rag into the bowl of water I filled in a nearby river, wiping it down his face significantly rougher than I have to. The Boy scrunches his nose at me and I scowl at him.

"Weren't you just tryna kill me?" The Boy asks, voice hoarse but his tone mirthful.

"So what?" I grumble, wringing excess water back into the bowl.

"And now you're taking care of me," he states. "That's kinda stupid."

*I feel a vein in my forehead tick. "Hah? You're the idiot who ate a wish, you don't **get** to call me stupid!" I snap, slapping the rag over his stupid amused eyes.*

There's a blissful moment of silence, then The Boy breaks it by speaking again. "So, why's your hair so long?"

I groan, burning my head in my knees. "I don't like to cut it," I spit out.

The Boy's mouth ticks down. "Why?" he asks.

I pause for a moment. "Because it reminds me of shit I would rather forget," I end up muttering.

I try my best to ignore the involuntary shiver that runs down my spine. The rough slide of a razor across scalp, the clatter of chains and the smell of stale blood, ice-cold ground and the sounds of screaming—

The Boy doesn't respond for a long moment, then heaves a sigh. "Can you get this thing off my eyes?" he requests.

I carelessly shove it further up onto his forehead. He goes back to staring at me in silence. I rub idly at my neck with the back of my wrist, not knowing whether to curse the humidity or be thankful it's not freezing.

"It was stupid," I blurt. The Boy raises an eyebrow. "Eating the wish," I clarify. "You should puke the sucker up, might make you feel better."

The Boy makes a face. "No," he denies.

I glower at him. ***"Idiot.*** *Why the hell did you do it in the first place?"*

He stares for a moment. "Needed it," he settles on.

I scowl at him. "Well ***I*** *need it too, and you've really fucked me over."*

The Boy blinks slowly at me. "What do you need it for?" he questions.

"My home is in danger. I need to save a lot of people who're counting on me," I murmur, wrapping my arms tighter around my knees and frowning at the ground.

The Boy seems to think for a second, eyes roving across the canopy, then looks back to me. "You can have it. But only if you complete ***my*** *wish," he decides.*

I blink incredulously, head snapping up to meet his even gaze. "HAH?! It's a ***wish!*** *How the hell do you know if I'd even be able to do what you want from it?!" I shriek, hands flailing.*

The Boy just laughs and smiles wide at me. "You can. I can feel it."

_____

I startle upright with a strangled sound tangled up in my throat, one hand flying toward my neck and the other flailing out to grab something that isn't there. Or rather, smacking into something that *is* there, but isn't whatever the hell I thought it was.

I blink rapidly, trying to adjust to the lighting of the room. I'm in the cabin Hancock had been given on the Marine ship, laid across the couch I had settled on to take a nap. My hand is tangled up in the back of Luffy's shirt where he's sat on the floor between the table and I.

He's looking back at me with concern in his eyes, but leans back into the couch so he can slide my hand from his shirt to his neck, a firm press of my fingers to pulse. "Nightmare?" he asks. "I had one too."

I squint my eyes closed for a second to just breathe, then shake my head. "No, regular dream," I mumble. "I dunno why I'm…" I let my words trail off, flopping back down onto the couch.

Luffy just looks at me for a second, then reaches back to the table and grabs a plate, offering some food which I gladly take. At this rate I'm going to be fucking exhausted by the time we actually get to Impel Down.

There's a light cough and I startle again, eyes snapping to where Hancock is sitting primly in one of the chairs, eyes averted and looking like she doesn't know how to process what she was looking at.

"You had something to eat, Princess? Luffy hasn't been hogging it all?" I ask, shuffling upright so I can eat without getting shit all over myself.

Her mouth pinches. "Yes, I ate," she says stiffly.

There's a sudden scratching/shuffling sound at the door, followed by hushed whispers and giggles. We all snap to attention, eyes narrowed at the only entrance and exit to the room. Hancock is up without a word, swinging the door open and turning the two men trying to peek in into stone, then swinging it back shut without preamble.

"Gnats," she hisses in disdain, striding back and draping herself across the chair.

I frown at the door before turning back to Hancock. "I'm sorry they're treating you like this," I apologize.

"They try and stare because I'm beautiful," Handcock says dismissively, throwing her hair over her shoulder with an indifferent expression. "It is the nature of men to be this weak."

I make a face. "Even so. You aren't a display to be gawked at, and it's not fair to you that they act like this. You don't deserve your appearance being used like that, no matter how much it benefits you in other areas," I mutter, moving into criss-cross and starting to eat the slab of Sea King meat Luffy gave me.

Hancock blinks at me blankly for a moment, before cherry red blooms high on her cheeks and she jerks her face away with a scowl. For a second dread spreads through my stomach at what *that* could possibly mean, but then—

"Your concern is misplaced. I don't require your pity or petty insights," she snaps, crossing her arms and firmly planting her head in the other direction with her nose turned up.

I huff a laugh and roll my eyes, returning to my food.

_____

It’s four days straight trapped in that single room with Hancock fawning over Luffy, Luffy not noticing at all, Hancock making jabs at me and being terribly shocked every single time I shoot one back, the guys on this ship being damn creeps, and a whole fuckton of Sea King meat.

_____

“Luf, think you could help me rewrap these?” I ask, unwinding my excessive amount of bandages with the bandage rolls, antiseptic wipes and pill bottle Dr. Kurotsuru gave me lined up on the table.

“Yeah, no problem,” Luffy responds, finishing the last of yet another meal and trotting to sit beside me on the couch.

We’re nearly finished with our journey to Impel Down, so I figure going in with fresh dressings is in my best interest. I start with my chest, shoulders and stomach, just so I’m not chilling with my titties out.

“You are a terribly indecent individual,” Hancock sniffs, looking terribly unimpressed with me.

I shrug. “There’s only three of us in here and all the curtains are closed, not much of a show to put on.”

The bandage on my cheek is long gone, just a fading bruise taking its place. By some stretch of a miracle, I’ve managed to not rip up the compression sleeves on my knees despite the amount of falling and skidding I did in the fight on Sabaody. The leather gloves I got from Nami have also stayed unruined, so besides my flannel being swapped out for Coin’s shirt and the addition of my hat, I’m basically right where I was when we landed on Sabaody clothing wise.

That’s… yikes. It’s not even been a week, our travel time to the prison included. *Damn,* my life went downhill quick.

Cleaning my wrists up in a simple affair, they're well on their way to healing aside from a few cuts I picked at when I wasn't paying attention. Those dumb fucking cuffs sliced deeper than I would like, and much rougher than is ideal for how these scars are gonna be. But after a couple swipes of the antiseptic wipes on the reopened lacerations, my arms are wrapped back up to the shoulders and out of mind.

My neck is the more unpleasant part. I can't really see what I'm doing so it's up to Luffy to clean up whatever's going on down there, and despite how careful he's being, he's still Luffy and I'm still me.

It only takes a couple of instinctive flinches before Luffy is making distressed sounds and we mutually agree he's just gonna do it as fast as possible. So after some rudimentary wipes and nearly choking me to death by wrapping my neck too tight, if not *well,* the job is done.

Luffy scrambles up and relocates to the bench beside the windows as soon as he's done, peeking out the curtains and repeatedly scrunching his nose to try and clear the smell of the antiseptic.

"What are those wounds from?" Hancock pipes up, voice smaller than the one she's been using for me this whole time.

I swallow down two pills and glance at her from the corner of my eye. "Got a little bit kidnapped when we were on Sabaody," I say, shrugging as nonchalantly as I can. "Turns out the Human Shop Doflamingo owns up there is staffed by incompetent idiots, so it's pretty easy to just…" I mime garrotting someone to death, then shrug again.

There's a moment of silence across the room. I actually turn to look at Hancock. Her face is pale and she's staring into her lap, where her tense hands are clenched in the fabric of her skirt. "You were…" she mumbles, voice tight.

"They never even got me on the stage," I say, leaning forwards onto my knees with a smile. "I was barely in chains for more than an hour. I'm very lucky that way."

Her eyes rise to meet mine. “...Yes, I suppose you are,” she murmurs, brows pinched.

“Uh, that’s a lot of battleships,” Luffy announces from the bench. Both me and Hancock’s heads snap towards him.

“Miss Hancock! We’re arrived!” someone shouts from outside the door. “It’s time to leave!”

“There’s more than there were in the Buster Call,” Luffy continues, tone uneven. “And Ace is in this place?”

“They house some of the most dangerous criminals in the world, I suppose this type of security is only natural,” Hancock says stiffly, standing and adjusting her clothing. “Now quickly, both of you, get inside my robes.”

Me and Luffy exchange a look, a nod, and do just that.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Jonah. He babygirled his way into being an accessory to terrorism on accident :(
My guy is living life checking over his shoulder waiting for that RA recruitment speech.
What can I say, I missed my boy. And I wanted to peek in at Sabo. He deserves the attention and I think it's important we keep in mind who's on the other side of this conflict; idiots with jobs and suspicious bosses who just want to stop being accosted in dark hallways.

Commodore Jean-Rousseau upon hearing Jonah disrespect a superior officer (himself) and say something absolutely batshit: Oh I gotta get this guy to Garp I fucking *gotta.*

Ed 🤝 Jonah
Immediately getting attached to people to an astronomical degree in very short periods of time in a way that's *probably* unhealthy or related to trauma, but who gives a shit.

Chapter 117: Chapter One Hundred and Seventeen: Heaven Ain’t Close In A Place Like This

Chapter Summary

Somebody Told Me - The Killers

Dear fucking god can they get some prison regulations in here? That is goddamn ridiculous.

Chapter Notes

Do I even need to tell you this one is almost 5k? I am not apologizing but by god am I disappointed in myself for my inability to shut the fuck up.

Speaking of which, I have been shutting the fuck up. And by that I mean school has my ass so tired I haven't been on Tumblr or here very often but imma try and get back to answering asks and comments when I can ✌

Also I may or may not have started writing another thing that I'll probably give up on and abandon in a month or so but until then my attention be split as I patiently wait for the hyperfixation to pass.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I can’t hear a lot from the position I’m in, and I’m doing my best to forget what exactly that position *is,* but judging by the fading sounds of catcalls and fawning, we’re finally entering the interior of Impel Down.

I mean, there’s screams of pain and terror now, but the shift is pretty telling all the same.

“Welcome to my Impel Down,” someone says, muffled though everything is. “Oops, jumped the gun there, saying ‘my.’ It’s not *mine* yet. I’m the Vice Warden, Hannyabal. For now, at least. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Vice Admiral.”

“I’m Momonga,” the Vice Admiral greets, voice flat.

“We’ve been expecting you. Ah, and this must be the Pirate Empress! My… Pirate Empress?” Oh dear *god* this *guy.* “Oops! I’m being too ambitious again! The dumbass Warden — oopsie — the ‘perfectly competent’ Warden Magellan is in his office on Level 4, he would like to meet you. The Vice Head Jailer Domino would be more than happy to guide you there.”

I feel Luffy poke me at the name and roll my eyes, not exactly in a position to poke him back.

“It seems you’re in a rush, Empress, so please come this way. Vice Admiral, you may go that way. If you follow me, we’ll conduct our body search and begin the tour,” a feminine voice says politely.

Then we’re moving again. The sheer amount of pity I feel for Hancock, having to deal with both of us hanging off her like leeches, is immeasurable.

“If you were a prisoner, we would have you enter that cell and stripped of all your clothes, and pushed you into an iron pot filled with boiling water. We call it Hell’s Hot Tub. It’s a baptism and a sterilization all in one, quite economical,” Domino explains conversationally.

Dear fucking god can they get some prison regulations in here? That is goddamn ridiculous.

“There’s varying character amongst the prisoners. Of recent additions we have Fire First Ace, but that’s not all.” That has Luffy making a near silent noise. “Jimbei of the Seven Warlords is a newcomer, and the former Warlord Crocodile has resided here for some time now. None of them even batted an eye at their baptisms.”

We pause for a brief moment, and then there’s the sounds of a heavy door swinging open. “Don’t worry, all visitors are searched in a private room. After you,” she invites, and we move forward a few paces, then stop again as the door closes.

“Before we begin, I need to ask that you remove your cloak. It’s far too easy to conceal things inside there, so I’m afraid you’ll have to leave it here,” Domino says, and I feel the whole tangled group of us tense just a bit. “It’s not that we don’t trust you, we simply have a reputation to uphold. As you can see we have surveillance Transponder Snails all throughout the prison, their video footage is sent to our security monitors.”

Hmmmmmm sounds interesting.

“First, allow me to put these Seastone cuffs on you,” Domino says, followed by the sounds of clinking chains.

“You call me a visitor, not a prisoner, yet you put me in those,” Hancock says. There’s a tense moment of silence, then — “Please be gentle,” she murmurs sweetly.

I nearly burst out laughing.

“It’s safe now,” Hancock announces.

Me and Luffy immediately roll out from under Hancocks cloak and I let out the wheeze I had been holding in. “‘Please be gentle?’ Is that actually what did it?” I gasp, righting my hat on my head.

Domino and the Transponder Snail are both frozen in solid stone. Domino has her mouth agape with the cuffs held out, one eye obscured under sunglasses and both wavy blond hair and her askew uniform hat over the other. You really got to wonder how they get away with making that a regulation uniform because yeesh… it looks like a sexy cop Halloween costume.

“That was close, I thought we were gonna have to crawl out like cockroaches!” Luffy snickers, popping to his feet and shoving his own hat on.

“It looks like this is as far as I can take you,” Hancock says apologetically. “I can’t use my powers with the cuffs, and they’re taking my cloak. I wish I could do more, but…”

“What’re you talking about? We wouldn’t have made it inside without your help!” Luffy rebuffs. “Even with the place surrounded by battleships, we got in no problem! We’ve got the rest.”

“Getting in is a huge hurdle, and you cleared the thing without breaking a sweat. There’s nothing there to be disappointed about,” I add.

“Luffy,” she addresses directly, voice concerned. I roll my eyes at the disregard. “This is a fortress from which there is no escape. If you get caught, you may never leave. I know you’re strong, but… promise me you won’t make a ruckus!”

Luffy reaches out and grabs her hand with a determined smile. “I promise! Thank you so much, Hancock! I’ll never forget this favour for the rest of my life, I’ll pay you back someday!”

Hancock, predictably, swoons so hard she all but collapses to the ground. “I can die happy, I have no regrets in this life!” she weeps.

I roll my eyes even harder, grabbing Luffy by the hand and turning our gravity until we’re falling onto the ceiling.

“You can turn them back now, we’ll be fine!” Luffy quietly calls down.

“Say it Luffy, say my name again,” she asks breathlessly.

“Uh, what?” Luffy responds. I shove my hand over my mouth to stop myself from bursting out laughing, again.

“Princess, it’s been a pleasure but *please* get your shit together,” I groan into my hand, trying to smother my smile. That has her snapping straight upright with an indignant look, mouth open for some kinda retort. “Really,” I interrupt her, trying to project how grateful I am that despite our… differences, she’s accommodated me. “Thank you, Hancock.”

Her riposte dies on her lips. She blinks once, slowly, up at us then turns and unfreezes Domino and the snail without a word.

_____

When Hannyabal knocks on the door and it’s swung open for Hancock and Domino, me and Luffy take our cue to scuttle out across the roof. While the procession heads for the big ol’ elevator, the both of us crouch down low into the ceiling.

As the door starts closing we both peek our heads down and make eye contact with Hancock. I flash her a heart with my hands (and incidentally one of Luffy’s), then realize that would be upside down and flip it while Luffy mouths thank you.

The last thing we see as the elevator closes is Hancock swooning into a straight up fall.

“What a weird lady,” Luffy comments in a near-whisper. I snicker, and after a quick consult of Ace’s smouldering vivre card, we both take off running down the lattice-like beams of the ceiling hand in hand.

“How attached to this are you? Like would you be mad if I used it as a bargaining chip?” I ask, indicating his armband with our linked hands.

Luffy furrows his brow and thinks real hard for a second. “Yeah, fine. But you gotta get me something new later, then,” he bargains.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll drip you out, I’ll ice you up. No problem,” I laugh. “Also, it’s for the best that we stall them finding out who we’re here for as long as possible, so don’t go running

around dramatically shouting Ace's name."

"Sure. We're supposed to go down, right?" he asks, taking a turn when he sees a staircase.

"Yeah, there's a hole in the Mean Red Forest of Knives. I don't know exactly where, though," I respond, adjusting our gravity to account for the slope of the stairwell.

"And that leads to the Petting Zoo on MDMA?" Luffy asks, pausing outside a big door at the bottom of the stairs. "This doesn't really look like a red knife forest, though. Is that further in?"

I pause too. "Aw, you remembered the dumb names?" I coo.

He opens his mouth to respond, but we both fall silent when voices echo from the staircase we came down. We duck low to the ceiling again as a platoon of guards storm down. "It's prisoner no. 8200!" one of them shouts.

"He seems to be a Devil Fruit user, so don't forget the Seastone cuffs!" another yells.

As they push the door open to enter, me and Luffy scramble through from above. This area is much taller than the previous — so with one turn of gravity I have us running straight up the wall until we reach a skinny walkway/balcony that services the second floor, and with another I have us back level and upright.

Luffy gives me a look that says 'this place is huge!' and I shoot back a look that says 'huge like this di—'

There's a scream that echoes through the halls, which is not terribly welcoming or sexy. We start running down the walkway regardless. "Whaddya think that's about?" Luffy asks as we go.

“Oh you know, general prison clown shit,” I answer.

“Hey, you two!” someone hisses as we pass a cell. The thing is jam packed with weirdos of all stripes in uniforms and chains, looking at us bewildered as they all press close to the bars. “Hey, how did you get out?!”

“Get out? No, we broke in,” Luffy corrects, frowning at the people as we both stop.

“What?! You’re lying!” a guy denies.

“Why are you outside a cell?” another asks.

“Do you guys know where the knife forest is?” Luffy questions instead of answering again.

“Knife forest — you mean the Crimson Hell?” someone in the opposite cell, also chalked full of guys in uniform and chains crowded at the bars, asks incredulously. “Why would you wanna go *there?!”*

“We gotta find the Petting Zoo on MDMA,” Luffy says, frustration leaking into his voice. “We’re trying to get to the bottom of the prison.”

“You want to get to Level 5?” yet another prisoner questions, bewildered. “That’s the floor where they keep criminals with bounties over 100 million!”

“I mean, yeah? I guess that’s on the way,” Luffy mumbles, stroking his chin.

“This is exhausting already,” I mutter, rubbing my eyes.

“Instead of that, why don’t you two go to the Jailer’s Room and get the keys for us?” the first guy suggests with a sly smile.

“Yes, please do it!” the guy from the other cell pleads.

“For us to meet in this huge world, it must be destiny!” someone gasps. “It’s like you were *born* to set us free, right?”

“What the fuck is happening,” I ask the heavens.

The heavens send more screaming in response. Actually, the heavens send screaming accompanied by stomping and scrambling feet, and the *weirdest* fucking noises I’ve heard in weeks. Like… inhuman growl monkey horse *sounds.*

“What’s that?” Luffy asks in confusion, turning towards the noises.

“Jesus’s jimjams what the actual *shit—”* I curse, staring incredulously at the fucking Blugori. They’re like if the abominable snowman was an easter egg with a skull painted on its face, and was given a huge fuck-off battleaxe and then pumped full of terribly illegal steroids. And also chasing someone and coming right for us.

“Run!” one of the prisoners shrieks.

The fact one of those godless things is literally galloping along a wall rules out just taking to the ceiling and making a break for it, and there’s no spaces to duck into to avoid the stampede, so that really is our only choice.

Then the guy they’re chasing gets cleaved in half right down the middle. Me and Luffy yelp as we start running, and his two disembodied parts continue running with us.

“It’s really hard to run like this!” he shrieks. “But GYAHAHAHA YOU CAN’T CUT ME IDIOT!” And his pieces seamlessly stick back together. Then he does a double take at us beside him. “Wha — STRAWHAT?! AND THAT… OTHER ONE?!”

“Heh? Oh, it’s you, Buggy,” Luffy huffs, looking over unperturbed.

“Buggy!” I cheer, throwing my hands up before jerking them back down as one of the Blugori takes a swing above us with its axe. “I love your hair! Wait — *other one?!* You don’t even know my name?!”

“I see prison hasn’t made you people any less annoying, you *assholes!”* he screeches, his head popping off and taking his gorgeous blue ponytail with it before reconnecting. “Speaking of, that King of the Pirates thing *clearly* isn’t going too well!”

“We came in on our own, only dumb people like you get caught and thrown in jail,” Luffy retorts.

“HAAAH?! You threw yourselves in jail and you’re calling ME dumb?!” Buggy squawks. Then his face does something funny and his eyes are filling with tears. “Don’t tell me you heard I got caught and came to… rescue me?” he cries, before his mouth twists into a sneer again and his hand detaches to dope slap Luffy. “EW! NO WAY! GROSS!”

“JUST SHUT UP AND GET OUT OF THE WAY!” Luffy shrieks.

I’m stuck in the middle of these fuckheads, so I just reach out and slap both of them across the face without breaking stride. “Focus up, buttheads! Get rid of the big murder gorillas, *then* bitch like petty tween girls!” I order.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY TO ME?!” Buggy snarls.

“Sorry, Ed!” Luffy groans. “But he’s so *annoying!”*

"EXCUSE ME?!" Buggy screams, slamming his forehead into Luffy's from over my head.

One of the big murder gorillas takes a huge leap towards us, axe raised and headed right for me. I push both of the guys to the side, then drop down and flip my gravity towards the end of the hall to slide forward under the axe as it embeds itself in the ground where I was a second ago.

"This was supposed to be a cinch!" Buggy wails, both him and Luffy speeding to catch up with me as I jump back to my feet. "I called it Buggy's Peaceful Escape Plan! DOES THIS LOOK VERY PEACEFUL TO YOU?!"

"Who cares?!" Luffy yells. Buggy just wordlessly screams.

Another pack of Blugori comes charging towards us from the direction we're headed. "I HAAAAAAAAATE THIS!" Buggy howls.

"Can we just beat these guys up?!" Luffy asks.

"Are you stupid?! You don't know how painful the torture in this place has been! Why do you think I'm running?!" Buggy moans pitifully.

"Yeah but I wasn't planning to lose," Luffy says exasperatedly, then turns to me. "We're already making so much noise, let's just make it fast!"

"Cutting off the commotion seems wise!" I huff out, very much not handling all this running well.

Buggy makes a strangled noise. "This is what I hate about you and that redhead! Both of you are optimistic in the worst way possible!" he weeps. "Alright, FINE! I'll go along with your plan — not like I have a CHOICE!" I whoop as he skids to a stop, turning on his heel with an

arm reared back and hand ready to shoot like a missile. “Change of plans, time for chaos!” he crows.

“Works for me!” Luffy laughs, stopping and spinning next and flinging his fist out.

“Just our specialty!” I grin, letting those two take the ones at our back while I slide to a halt with both guns raised at our front.

There’s the steady thwack of both their punches connecting with their targets, and I unleash a torrent of flames down the hall.

_____

All things considered, it’s not that bad of a fight. The fucking things refuse to stay down for anything less than an impact shot right to the dome at point blank range, and even then one of them nearly brains my gorgeous ass if not for Luffy stepping in, but still.

“I don’t like these things,” Luffy grumbles after taking down the last one, which Buggy was trying very hard to beat.

“No shit. They look like they’re built for giving hugs — like a fucking blackbear. Even with the skull thing, they’re so friend shaped,” I bemoan. “It’s downright depressing this is their profession.”

“Oh so you’re *actually* insane. You’re really just like this. Got it,” Buggy mutters under his breath, staring at the defeated pile of Blugori with fear and incredulity.

“We don’t have time to fight these weirdos all day,” Luffy frowns.

“They actually beat the Blugori,” one of the guys in the cells around us says in awe.

“Who are you people?!” another yelps.

“Hey, open the cage!” another demands.

“Will you stop yelling at us?” I grouch, shaking my fist at them.

“What are you idiots even doing here?” Buggy asks, yoinking one of the double-headed battleaxes from the limp hands of a Blugori.

“We’re here to get — uh, *someone,”* Luffy says imperiously, shooting me an incredibly obvious look and an obnoxious wink.

“Dear god,” I mumble, rubbing my forehead with a smile. “We’re here to break out Ace. DON’T scream,” I say, quickly lunging forward to smack my hand over his mouth when it opens comically wide along with his eyes.

“Why would I scream?! That would get us caught!” he hisses quietly, not convincing anyone. “Wait — *Ace?* Why are you here for *Ace?”*

“He’s my brother, of course we’re here for Ace,” Luffy sighs, shaking his head like Buggy is an idiot. I mean… he kinda is, but… “Wait, you know Ace?”

“Yeah… unlike you, your brother seems like a good guy!” Buggy harumps, crossing his arms and just not questioning the brother thing. “We were drinking buddies for a bit, so I was really bummed out when I heard what happened. The Marines are goddamn morons for picking a fight with Whitebeard like this.”

“Hard agree,” I groan before blinking and snapping. “Oh! Right, Buggy, Coin says hi. I completely forgot to say earlier.”

There's a moment of silence from the clown, then his jaw is quite literally dropping and he just starts screaming. "HAAAAAAAAAAH?!" he screeches, positively shrill.

I slowly remove my hands from where they were clamped over my ears, staring at him disparagingly. "Dude," I mutter, *"subtlety."*

"What do you mean *Coin says hi?!"* he hisses, eyes darting around like the guards are already going to be upon us.

"I mean he said to say hi, what the fuck else would I mean?" I say incredulously.

"Is your hearing imparted?" Luffy asks seriously.

"Impaired," I correct.

"So his hearing *is* impaired, got it," he nods sagely.

"That's not what I — oh whatever," I sigh.

"Why the hell would *Coin* tell *you* to say hi to me?!" Buggy gargles out, looking like he's trying not to pass out. "I mean — great news he's alive and all, but *HAH?!"*

"Because he cares about you? I dunno, ask the guy yourself next time you see him," I say exasperatedly.

"Can you guys let us out, or…" someone mutters from the cage.

"Can it!" all three of us snap at once.

“THERE THEY ARE!” a voice shouts from a lower level. All of our heads swivel that way, towards the pair of guards with their rifles pointed at us.

“Move it or lose it, partyboys!” I yelp, ducking as a bullet nearly takes off my ear.

“I still need an explanation!” Buggy yells as the three of us take off down the hall once more, gunfire following after us.

“I’m Coin’s kid!” I yell craning my neck to see where the guards are in relation to us.

“WHAT?!” Buggy shrieks. “SAY YOU’RE KIDDING *PLEASE!”*

“Can you get us down to Level 6?” Luffy interrupts.

“LEVEL *SIX?! THERE’S **ACTUALLY** SIX LEVELS?!”* Buggy screeches. “And what do you mean ‘get you there?!’ Why the hell would I do that?!”

“We’ll give you the map to Captain John’s treasure,” I offer, gesturing to Luffy’s armband.

Luffy glances down at it. “Is that what this is?”

Buggy once again blanches like we just shot a baby in front of him. The man is just straight bluescreening. Then the guards are suddenly in the hall behind us and we’re ducking and weaving through the hail of bullets like scattering mice. “THIS IS TOO MUCH INFORMATION AT ONCE!” he sobs, hands thrown straight up.

“Clown guy! Stop freaking out!” Luffy orders. “Can you get us down or not?!”

“I don’t know where the entrance to Level 2 is!” I yelp, nearly slamming into a wall in an attempt to not get a fancy new piercing in my side. “Buggy, we need your help!”

Buggy looks to the ceiling with tears streaming theatrically from his eyes, looking a little like he just heard the voice of god whisper in his ears the secret of the universe. We watch him basically cycle through the five stages of grief at a rapid pace, expression shifting and his head jerking dramatically like he’s having an entire internal dialogue we’re not privy to.

“CLOWN GUY!” Luffy yells again. “SNAP OUT OF IT, WILL YOU HELP OR NOT?!”

“I’LL DO IT!” Buggy screeches, his body detaching from his feet at the ankles with a deranged smile. “Grab my feet and run! I’ll show you where Level 2 is!”

Me and Luffy both whoop out cheers, Luffy grabbing Buggy’s discarded feet and both of us picking up our pace as Buggy’s body flies up ahead like a… cackling kite GPS. Luffy grabs me with his free arm, shoving the feet into my hands, then slingshots us up onto a higher level of the cell blocks to escape our pursuers.

I immediately shove the feet back into his hands once we’ve landed, because respectfully I will not be carrying a grown man’s feet around because *what.*

Buggy swoops down lower and just kinda stares at me with narrowed eyes. “Welcome to Wendy’s, what can I get for you?” I deadpan, raising an eyebrow.

“So you’re it, huh?” he says instead of questioning that. I furrow my brow at him. “Coin’s kid,” he elaborates.

I blink a couple times. “Oh. Yuppers, that’s me,” I confirm, nodding my head.

Buggy scrunches up his face, his big red nose shifting up. “Wow. I didn’t expect you to be such a pain in the ass, let alone *real.”*

I frown at him. “Hah? Coin said he’s been babbling about my ass for as long as you’ve been *alive,* how could you not think I’m real?” I ask incredulously.

“He jokingly called you the prophesied one a couple times so we really thought he was talking out of his ass. This is kinda shifting my whole worldview,” Buggy laments, the back of his hand draped on his forehead like a lady from a period drama.

“Oh my god no I’m a *nepo baby—”* I realize with sudden clarity, burying my face in my hands.

We pass a hall of cells with faint singing coming from it and all our heads turn that way. “Wassat?” Luffy asks.

“Probably Jackson Wang, in prison for party hosting crimes,” Buggy supplies. “Anyway, Coin did always say this shit would happen,” he sighs dramatically. “Can’t believe he was *right.”*

“Oh my god, did he actually?” I groan around a laugh.

“It was basically a running gag,” Buggy says with an eye roll. “Coin instilled us with it; if you’re in trouble just wait for his kid and they’ll get you out of any shit if you listen to them. It was his favourite pastime, just saying shit like ‘one day you’re gonna meet my protege and they’ll be able to get you out of ANYTHING,’ and ‘if you ever end up in prison just wait for my kid, they’ll break you out no problem,’ I cannot BELIEVE he wasn’t kidding.”

This fucking GUY. He has set me up as a joke DECADES IN ADVANCE. This must be insane to Buggy, like your dad’s batshit lore just casually popping up in your daily life.

“Half the crew got kidnapped once and all we had to say was ‘goddamnit. Guess we’re gonna have to wait for Coin’s kid to break us out,’” he continues, shaking his head with his mouth twitching like he doesn’t want to smile about it.

“Oh my god,” I wheeze out.

“Shanks made that joke,” Luffy recalls, remembrance dawning on his face.

Buggy makes this growl/screech sound. “Shanks!” he grouses, like just thinking of the damn guy makes him want to break out into hives.

“Yeah, when he lost his arm,” Luffy says casually. There’s a moment of forlorn silence. “He was all like ‘damn, Coin’s kid couldn’t have done shit for that? Really? Man,’” he continues, talking a step lower than his normal voice with an odd cadence.

Buggy is quiet for a moment. “Shanks gave up his arm for you,” he eventually says, more statement than question.

“Yeah,” Luffy responds, gaze straight ahead and mouth set in a straight line.

Buggy makes some frustrated noises. “Fucking damnit. Yeah that tracks,” he grumbles.

There’s another beat of unspeaking running, just the rhythmic smack of our feet on stonework. “Can’t believe that shithead pinned his loss of limb on me,” I deadpan into the silence.

Luffy laughs and Buggy groans loudly. “Of course he did, that *shithead.”*

I suddenly jerk to a stop, reaching out to grab Luffy and stop him from running. He does so immediately, raising his eyebrows at me while Buggy halts in his flying a few feet ahead. “Guards,” I point out quietly, pointing to a junction we were about to pass. The faint sound of footsteps and chatter echoes from it.

“Alright, so what do we do?” Buggy mutters under his breath, stroking his chin and staring ahead with narrowed eyes. “We could go up and avoid them entirely, but if they spot us we’re in for another chase all over again—”

Yeah Luffy has already gone running ahead with his fists up and a holler ringing from his mouth. The poor group of guards who came around the corner had no idea what was coming for them.

Buggy stares with a gaped mouth for a second as Luffy just starts wailing on them. “LEEEROOOOOY JEEEENKINS!” I yell belatedly.

“What is *wrong* with you people?!” Buggy cries into his hands. Or at least he does until Luffy has beaten all the guards to a pulp and started running the direction we were going before again, and because he still has Buggy’s feet, he starts getting dragged along. “Wait wait HEY *WAIT—”*

“C’mon Ed, we gotta go!” Luffy calls from ahead.

I roll my eyes heavenward and take off after them. “I told him I’d follow him to hell and back, I just wish he’d stop running there headfirst,” I huff as I run to catch up with them both. “‘I’d lead them there,’ I thought he was kidding! I thought he was being cute!”

“So you can really get us down to the Petting Zoo on MDMA?” Luffy asks, directing a wide smile at our clown companion.

“The fucking *what* — I can lead you as far as Level 4, that’s as far down as I’ve been,” Buggy responds, glowering.

“Sounds great!” Luffy cheers. “And you want this treasure map thingy?”

Buggy’s eyes flash and his expression twitches. “So you really do know what it is?!” he gargles. I watch his hands jerk towards the bigass axe on his back and roll my eyes. “I’ll take

it by force if I—”

“Here you go!” Luffy says cheerfully, holding the armband out. “You better take it now in case I forget later!’

Buggy gapes at him for a long moment. “Even though you know what it is, you’re just giving it to me?!” he strangles out.

“Yeah, I just wanna save Ace!” Luffy grins.

“I got explicit permission from Captain John’s dead body to have the treasure if I found it, I dunno if I can like… pass that on, but you’ve got my blessing!” I add with a snicker.

“...Hah..?! B — but you know if you give it to me now I could just take off without helping, right?!” he shrieks, eyes bugging out.

“I mean, yeah, but you said you’d help!” Luffy says simply. “Plus you’re friends with Ed’s guy, and he seemed cool!”

Buggy dramatically bursts into tears, reaching out to take the armband before his face twists into this sleazy smile. Then he slams backwards into the wall he couldn’t see behind him.

“Is this the fastest way through? Leave it to me!” Luffy shouts, rearing back and just fucking punching Buggy in the gut hard enough to bust right through the damn wall. He keeps his momentum running through the room he broke into, then busts right through the other side.

I stopped running in the middle of the Jailer’s Room, so I just kinda watch Buggy fall screaming out the hole with Luffy grappling to his front. I glance around at the guards gaping and screaming at me and the hole.

The only one who seems to have his shit together levels a rifle at me, but I'm faster. I shoot two impact shots from my right pistol at him and the gaggle of other guards, snagging what had caught my eye on a desk and beelining for the shattered opening to the Mean Red Forest of Knives.

I leap out with gunfire and screaming at my back, a grin on my face and some poor shit's lunch clutched in my hand, falling towards my Captain and the flying clown.

Chapter End Notes

I LOVE writing Buggy. I LOVE it. I love HIM. Stupid fucking clown. My stupid fucking clown wife. He is having the most mind boggling day of his LIFE.

Jackson Wang reference specifically for that motherfucker who would not cease asking for one in my Tumblr asks. This is for you bbg. I listened to three whole songs of his for you, not my usual cup of tea but the cinematography and effects in his music videos is only rivaled by the dancing.

Nothing says fuck the cops like stealing their lunch during a prison break.

Coin is out here playing the most AUDACIOUS long con for his punchline setups. My man heard about the second coming of Christ and went 'oh I could make *such* a wild joke about this. Gimme 50 years.' And he MEANT THAT SHIT.

Chapter 118: Chapter One Hundred and Eighteen: Too Early For Surrender, Too Late For A Prayer

Chapter Summary

Can't Go to Hell - Sin Shake Sin

"This is so *gross,"* I reframe, face twisting up at the red stained forest and the wailing and bloody people. There's a few guards we can see from above, pitchforks jabbing at prisoners while they scream. And the *spiders*. I will not even mention the *spiders*.

Chapter Notes

Man school is hard and I miss being able to write whenever I want and not spending an hour and a fucking half on public transport 😔

You know what that hour and a half on public transport has made me into? Someone who made a game of identifying the make of every car I saw out the window and now Cannot Stop Noticing a car's make when I look at it. I DON'T KNOW ABOUT CARS. I DON'T EVEN LIKE CARS. I DIDN'T KNOW HALF THE CAR MAKES I KNOW NOW LAST WEEK. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW EMBARASSINGLY LONG IT TOOK ME TO CONNECT THE AUDI LOGO TO THE NAME AUDI??? MY SISTER USED TO DRIVE ME TO SCHOOL IN THE AUDI MY MOM HAD LONGER THAN I'VE BEEN ALIVE AND I COULDN'T FUCKEN REMEMBER THE SYMBOL??? DUDE??? (Outing myself as giving Ed's sister a hand-me-down Audi because *my* sister had a hand-me-down Audi. If anyone remembered or cared about that detail.)

Mental illness is crazy because it will have you on the Cars Direct website picking out specific car makes and models and exact years and paint colours for characters like a fucking psychopath. No one cares or needs to know that shit. It is never going to come up and you're probably never even going to finish the thing you're doing it for. What is wrong with you.

Anyway onto the actual chapter lmao

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I only actually fall for a few seconds before Luffy's arm is stretching out and wrapping around my waist, anchoring and yanking me towards where he's all but surfing on Buggy's

back.

“This is so cool!” Luffy marvels, peeking over the side of Buggy’s giant axe at where his feet are running across the needle grass and just splitting to avoid being shred to pieces.

“This is so *gross,”* I reframe, face twisting up at the red stained forest and the wailing and bloody people. There’s a few guards we can see from above, pitchforks jabbing at prisoners while they scream. And the *spiders.* I will not even mention the *spiders.*

“Hey, where’d you get food?” Luffy asks, pointing to the sub with a singular bite taken out of it I unwrap and rip in two.

“Stole it,” I respond simply, handing him half. “Buggy, you want some?”

“Uh, no,” Buggy says flatly.

“Suit yourself,” I shrug, taking a giant bite out of it.

“Anyway, lucky for us the way down to Level 2 doesn’t need stairs or a key,” he comments, swerving around trees and people. “The Crimson Hell comes equipped with an escape route!”

“Why would they do that?” Luffy asks, furrowing his brow and eating his half of the sub in one neat chomp.

“Nobody ever uses it because it just leads to a worse hell, Level 2!” he states, skidding to a stop and connecting back with his feet right at the edge of the giant hole. “There’s plenty of guys who hope to escape to the surface, but there isn’t an idiot big enough to be willingly to go the other way!”

“Uwah, it’s pitch black!” Luffy awes, both of us perched on Buggy’s shoulders like a pair of vultures. And man, that pit is fucking *creepy.* It’s like a giant well leading to nothing. I scowl

down into it, finishing my meal. “This is perfect, we can just fly down there!”

Buggy makes apprehensive sounds. “Yeah, but down there—”

“Wahoo!” Luffy cheers, jumping off and yanking me with him. I yelp as we go into a freefall down the black void. “I wonder what’s down here?!”

“HEY!” Buggy shrieks after us.

———

All things considered, it’s not that bad of a fall. With the combined prowess of Luffy and I’s powers, we tank that shit like bosses. Poor Buggy’s body belly flopping after us is a little sad, but ultimately just the way shit be sometimes.

His head drops down and bounces off his own chest, and his legs twitch while he makes a pathetic wheeze.

Luffy, giving no fucks, just grabs his head and points him around like a hooded lantern. “What way?” he asks, looking down at Buggy’s body. Said body points a vague direction that may just be him twitching in pain again. “Great! Let’s go!” Luffy cheers, taking off in that direction.

Eventually Buggy gets his body upright from it being dragged after us, through plentiful bitching and moaning.

“So are we gonna get to pet the animals down here?” Luffy asks as we swing around a corner.

“Why the *real actual* ***hell*** would you be petting anything down here?!” Buggy hisses.

“I mean, Ed called it the Petting Zoo on MDMA, so I assumed we’d get to pet something,” Luffy says with that old familiar ‘you’re stupid’ tone.

“Luffy, you can’t pet anything down here,” I crush his dreams. He gives me a glassy eyed pout and I reach over to ruffle up his hair. “This place is full of weird chimeras, right?” I direct at Buggy.

He shivers and darts his eyes around the corridors and arches like they’ll suddenly turn to bite him. “And the like,” he mutters.

“Chimeras?” Luffy prompts.

“Like an animal that’s multiple animals,” I explain. “Like a sphynx is a lion eagle lady, or a manticore is a lion scorpion dude, a gryphon is a bird horse, or a bird *snake* is a—”

“Oh my god,” Buggy interrupts to whimper, *“fucking basilisk.”*

“Yeah, that’s ri…” I trail off. A strange rumble like a hissy squawk echoes through the junction we’re in.

All three of us freeze. I slowly raise my eyes up to the fuCKING BASILISK TOWERING OVER US.

“Oh. Huh. Yeah, that’s it,” I say faintly.

The basilisk blinks at us. We blink at the basilisk. The basilisk opens its beak.

“HOLY SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!” we all scream, spinning around and fucking booking it as the chicken-snake lunges for us.

“FUCK THAT! FUCK THAT SO HARD!” I screech, pumping my legs as fast as the damn things’ll go as the basilisk tears through the maze of cells and walkways behind us.

“I was gonna leave you behind! Everything wrong in my life is your fault!” Buggy sobs.

“What did you say?!” Luffy asks, neck craned back at the monstrosity. “I can’t hear you!”

“WE’RE GONNA DIE!” Buggy wails in response.

“LUFFY, KILL THAT THING!” I shriek, ducking into a roll when it takes a fucking peck at us with its stupid fucking mouth. I get bonked on the dome by a flying piece of Buggy, followed quickly by him quite literally crying his head off as it rolls onto the ground beside me.

One of the basilisk’s wings comes swooping at us as it spins to attack Luffy, who had jumped up to try and punch it, and both of us scream while I grab his head and dive for cover. “This is the worst!” he wails, half smooshed into my chest.

“No shit!” I cry back, smacking ass first into one of the cells that line the wall. Someone immediately grabs my ankle from inside and I kick them without hesitation. Whoever it was yelps, but I’m more busy rolling to the side because the rest of Buggy’s body has caught up and snaps back together with a force that slams him into the bars as well.

“I wanna go hoooome!” Buggy moans.

I pick myself up off the ground, grab him by the arm and start yanking and running back towards the basilisk with a warcry. “COME AT ME CHICKEN, I’LL PLUCK YOU!” I holler, gearing up to hurl Buggy like a fucking cannonball.

“Wait WAIT *WAIT—”* he screams. I throw him anyway.

Luffy leaps off of the bridge he had been perched on, snagging Buggy out of the air and throwing him over the basilisk's head in a high arc like sinking a basketball shot. "Thanks, Ed!" he calls, parkouring off a wall to jump back at the thing.

"No problem!" I call back, laying down some cover fire while Buggy finally gets with the program and takes a wild swing at the thing's back with his axe, still screaming and crying like an infant.

The distractions work wonders, so when Luffy comes crashing down on the fucker's head with a big ol' Gear 3 fist and sends it hurtling into the wall, smashing stone and collapsing parts of the brick, it stays the fuck down.

"Good teamwork!" I say proudly, giving Buggy a thumbs up while he stares at me and shrunk down Luffy like we boiled a kitten alive right before his very eyes.

"A) WHAT THE *FUCK,"* he screeches out, "AND B) *WHAT THE* ***FUCK?!"***

I squint at part of the shit the basilisk knocked down, then turn to one of the people in the cells staring at us in awe. "Hey. Was that the Jailer's Room?" I ask, pointing to what looks like a bunch of men in uniform through a crumbled wall. The guy nods numbly and I give him an assertive nod back. "Cool. Hey Buggy, you deal with them," I call, picking my way up and over the basilisk and stray chunks of brick.

I jump down into the remains of the Jailer's Room and glance around. I guess the universe is making up for how much it's sucked lately, because all the guards are decisively down already.

"Level 2 Jailer's Room, please respond!" a Transponder Snail yells from the ground. "Has something happened down there?! Jailer's Room!"

There's a half conscious guard shakily reaching for it, and I'm quick to bonk his head into the floor and knock him out. I roughly clear my throat before I pluck the snail off the ground and

pick up the receiver. “Hello, Level 2 Jailer’s Room,” I greet, voice slightly raspy from clearing it. “I apologize for the delay, *someone* was having a *dick measuring contest* over who would answer,” I say pointedly, as if I’m scolding someone.

“Ah, that’s a relief!” the person on the other end of the call sighs. “Important news! We’ve identified the people running around with Buggy the Clown!”

Ah shit. “Is that so?” I hum, walking through the destroyed room and peeking around. “This’ll be good, whatcha got?”

“We don’t know why or how they’re here, but without a doubt they’re the pirates Strawhat Luffy and his First Mate, the Detective of the Damned!” he announces.

I snort. “Right, pretty sure they’re not,” I respond.

The snail blinks stupidly at me for a second before its eyes bug out. “HAH?! No, it’s them for sure!” he repeats, voice adamant.

“Yeah… no,” I refute. “You see, Greg got sucker punched by one of them — he has a big black eye now, it was hilarious — and it’s definitely not those pirates. You know Greg, he may be an idiot but he isn’t *blind.* He’s making an artist’s rendition right now, I can send it up when he’s finished,” I say easily, lying out of my ass.

“The Level 1 jailers room got a pretty close look too,” he argues.

“Yeah… but we also heard one of them yell ‘locking me in here was the worst mistake of your lives!’ before they punched Greg,” I say flatly. “And there was the ‘you won’t keep me prisoner!’ I think it’s fair to say they’re residents.”

“But… what about their clothing? They aren’t in prison uniforms!” he contends, albeit more hesitantly now.

“Yeah, about that. It would seem *someone* left a *certain room* unlocked, and they got into some… *contraband,”* I say vaguely, hoping there’s some kinda room with contraband somewhere.

“Then… who is it?” the guy asks helplessly. Good enough for me.

“This is embarrassing, none of us can remember their numbers,” I say sheepishly. “But I remember the two of them being incarcerated sometime three or four weeks ago. I think we’re just having a classic case of *someone* incorrectly cataloguing their powers and them being… missorted into Level 1 without the proper precautions,” I say snidely.

“...Oh,” he gulps. “That would be… oh.”

“Uh huh,” I deadpan, voice unimpressed. “Once these prisoners are recaptured and locked back up, can you *please* make sure it’s done correctly and have them placed accordingly?” I ask with a fake ass sweet smile.

“I — of course,” he acquiesced, sounding embarrassed. “Oh my, I have some people to call back.”

“You do that. And in the future maybe have an *intelligent* mind on it, to avoid anymore… mixups,” I suggest with a sarcastic lilt. “I’ll send you that artist’s rendition in a minute, you pin it up and frame it for me, neh?”

“Right. Ok. Sorry. Bye,” he chokes out, then hangs up.

I stare at the crumbling ceiling for a long moment. “One day,” I whisper, “one day impersonating government personnel will fail me, but that day is not today.”

It may only be a temporary stopgap, and they'll absolutely know it's really us sooner than I'd like anyway, but who knows? Maybe those few minutes of clemency will save our asses somehow.

With that little annoyance taken care of, I start scouring over the room in earnest, looking for one thing in particular. I kick over one of the unconscious guards, and I feel my entire face light up when I see he has what I'm looking for.

"Hello, gorgeous," I murmur, snagging the Black Transponder Snail from his wrist with a wide grin. I flick open the shell/cap/thingy and the snail squints at me. "Oh you're comin' home with me," I snicker, leaving the room to trot back to my compatriots.

"Ed, are you ready to go yet?" Luffy asks as I rejoin him. I guess all the prisoners got released while I was in there, because they're all crowding around and cheering Buggy's name.

"Yeah," I respond, giving the snail an appraising look. "I think I'm gonna go with… Hokage. For the laughs," I decide. "I've got a President and a Prime-Minister, why not a Hokage? Spice things up."

"President, Prime-Minister, and… Hokage?" Luffy asks with a tilt of his head.

I nod decisively. "Because he's basically a spy, which is basically a ninja, and the strongest ninja is the Hokage. I rest my case."

"I'm going to vomit," Buggy groans, looking more like he's going to cry than puke. "I *cannot* believe you're real. I *cannot* believe Coin wasn't making the Hokage up."

"Oh my god he told you about *Naruto—"*

"Can we go now?" Luffy asks impatiently. "You've gotta get us down to Desert Hellscape Round 2."

“Seriously, *what* are these names?” Buggy mutters incredulously.

“Can you get us there or not?” Luffy demands. “Is there another hole we gotta jump down? C’mon, lead the way!”

“I don’t know!” Buggy shrieks. “You think I remember the whole layout of this fucking labyrinth?!”

“Hah?! You said you could get us to the 4th one — uuuuh, Cook Your Darlings in the Boiling Pot of Doom? — whatever, you promised!” Luffy argues.

“Hey guys,” I try to interrupt.

“I lied! I was LYYYYYYING! I wanted the treasure map so I *LIED!”* Buggy cackles maniacally.

“Guys,” I try again.

“With all these prisoners rioting, the chaos will be immeasurable! And with that I can — hey!” Buggy yells, finally noticing that all of the prisoners who had been swarming and cheering have ducked back into their cells and are staring out with fearful eyes. “What are you guys doing?! This is, like, your chance to escape!”

“You *lied?!”* Luffy gasps in offence, then turns to me. “He *lied!”*

I roll my eyes heavenward. “The prisoners have gone back into their cages,” I announce unhelpfully, because they did not let me speak before that was obvious.

“Chance shmance, we just got carried away!” one of the prisoners shouts out to us. “Escape is impossible, not with the boss of this floor still roaming around! We’re better off in the cages!”

Buggy is still for a moment, then turns back to Luffy with an easy, charismatic smile. “Ok, Strawhat! I’ve decided I’ll guide you to Level 3!”

“Guys,” I try again to interrupt.

“HAH?! You just said you didn’t know, big nose!” Luffy shrieks, slamming his forehead into Buggy’s.

“Is this gonna be a running gag?” I ask rhetorically.

“EXCUSE YOU?! MY NOSE IS PERFECT!” Buggy shrieks back.

“If you’re having trouble navigating this floor, I can help,” a new voice proclaims. The boys stop fighting to turn to the newcomer.

“The bad tactician is here,” I announce unhelpfully, pointing at him because I once again was not given an opening to speak before he is very obvious.

It’s the bad tactician. Well, Mr. 3, that is. He’s kinda super dirty, and his hair is limp and pathetic, and his glasses are cracked, and he is in desperate need of a shave, but it’s him. His face twists up and he harumps. “I am not a—! Whatever. What I *am* is a man who always pays back his debts, and you just set me free, Strawhat Luffy,” he says imperiously.

“Who the hell are you?” Luffy asks blankly. 3 deflates, then props up his stupid hairstyle so we can read the number. Luffy gasps and slaps his fist into his palm. “Giant island! 3!”

“Mr. 3!” he corrects in a shriek.

“I am fucking *amazed* you survived the implosion under Rain Dinners, you should totally be dead my guy,” I say, giving him an appraising look.

He huffs and puffs up his chest with a smirk, holding his hands up and wagging his fingers as they turn into wax and start dripping. “You’ll find I’m incredibly resourceful,” he brags. “And there was an extra floaty piece of wood, for your information.”

“Yeah, I’m sure—” My comment is cut off by… noises. We all pause. “What the fuck was that,” I ask flatly.

“I… I think we should move now,” Mr. 3 recommends, his face turning queasy as we all slowly turn towards the darkened end of the hall the noises originated from.

“A — agreed,” Buggy squeaks out, already shuffling the other direction.

“What’s that?” Luffy asks, squinting at the darkness, which has started chittering now as well. I don’t like the chittering, 9 times out of 10 chittering means bugs. I am *not* down with bugs.

A face peeks out of the shadows. We all stiffen up. “No more…” it groans, teeth big and sharp and features human-*like,* but ungracefully missing the mark.

“Absolutely the fuck not,” I deadpan.

A second face peeks out, then another, and another, and the chittering gets louder, and that’s pretty much it for me. I swipe a handful of small pieces of rubble off the ground, then spin on my heel and start booking it.

“HOLY SHIT RUUUUUUUUUUUUUN!” Buggy screams, following immediately after me with the other two on his heels.

Exeunt, pursued by tiny man-faced lions and a bigass weird lookin' centipede thing.

_____

Right. So I am still no runner, no trackstar. Our mad dash through the maze of the Petting Zoo on MDMA is sucky and terrible, and I am not having any fun at all.

The guys are all occasionally turning to shoot fists, punches or wax at the growing horde of beasts and creatures chasing us — and I periodically twist to offer my own support — but for the most part I have another focus.

The thing about this prison is it has worse security than my high school did, which is a little pathetic. I mean to be fair, my high school was significantly smaller and not built like some kinda funhouse castle, but my point stands. Where that metaphorical prison had cameras at every corner, junction and hall, this literal prison's camera placement is a bit more… sporadic.

Anyway, my self-appointed job during our little sprint is taking the pieces of rubble I snagged and hurling them like homing missiles at all the Visual Transponders I see.

"How the hell are you doing that?" Buggy demands, watching incredulously as the stone I threw arcs around to the left and beans a snail right off the damn ceiling.

"Got saddled with a Devil Fruit since we last met," I answer, taking a quick sweep of the ceiling before chancing a shot over my shoulder with a flying slash.

"How the hell are you doing *that?!"* Mr. 3 adds, staring at my gun in bewilderment.

"Dials and shit, can you two focus?" I respond, shooting a glare at both before sniping another Transponder high upon a wall. I don't even want to think about the karma I'm

compiling by knocking these poor shits down.

“Wait, what do you mean you got *saddled with a Devil Fruit?”* Buggy questions, his torso detaching and spinning around to shoot his hands at a lion-thingy getting a little too close for comfort.

“I mean I was in a life or death situation and ate a fucking Fruit, what is not clicking with you people?” I groan exasperatedly. “Learn to accept a simple answer, it’ll keep your lifespan longer!”

“Oh *I’m sorry,* didn’t know getting some goddamn *context* would *kill me!”* Buggy shrieks, looking fit to jump my ass.

“You’re shaping up to die by your 40’s, this level of stress can’t be healthy and I’m fearful for your blood pressure!” I snark, taking down yet another snail. This better be actually working — I want my stupid ploy to last longer than a few flimsy minutes, and keeping those sons of bitches in the Monitor Room from seeing us is the best way to extend it.

“Uh — the giant centipede just exploded into a bunch of scorpions!” Luffy reports. My head snaps to him, where he’s staring at his fist in horror like *he* turned the centipede into scorpions, then to said used-to-be-centipede scorpions.

“They’re Puzzle Scorpions, they’re extremely poisonous!” Mr. 3 yelps, trying to pick up the pace.

“Why do they just keep coming?!” Buggy wails, hands clutching at his beautiful blue hair. “Hey, isn’t the boss of this floor supposed to be some kind of lion monster?! ARE THOSE THINGS IT?!”

“Hah, I wish!” 3 scoffs miserably. “Those are man-eating lions with human faces! Manticores!”

“I thought the scorpions were supposed to be *a part* of the lion guys?” Luffy questions, turning to me like I have all the answers in the universe. “Why are they outside the lion guys?!”

“To be fair, they’re also supposed to have porcupine quills they can shoot like goddamn arrows and three rows of teeth and sometimes fucking *wings,* so I’m not getting caught up in the lackluster realism this place offers!” I yelp, letting Luffy yank me around a corner as we switch directions.

“WHY IS THAT SO MUCH WORSE?!” Buggy sobs. Honestly I’m just hoping they stop shouting at us soon, the begging for mercy and keys and beef steak is getting real old real fast. And the underwear talk, that’s just disturbing.

“Superstars, I’m running outta rocks!” I announce, nearly tripping and eating shit when I stop looking where I’m going to bonk another snail.

Mr. 3 makes a weird noise in the back of his throat then blindly smacks his hand over to me until he finds my palm, leaving behind a bunch of marble-sized pebbles of wax before twisting around to shoot more wax at the manticores.

“Thank you!” I holler, whipping one at the snail at the end of the hall turning our way.

“You said you know your way around, right?” Luffy asks, looking across me at 3.

“That’s right, we should all work together to escape this place!” Mr. 3 responds.

“Awesome, which way is the way down to Desert Hellscape Round 2?” he asks.

“The wha — wait, *DOWN?!* YOU’RE NOT TRYING TO *ESCAPE?!”* 3 shrieks, jaw dropping.

“Long story short, Strawhat and the Detective are here to save Strawhat’s brother Ace!” Buggy lays out, sounding none too pleased.

“FIRE FIST ACE?!” 3 screeches, then immediately veers to the side towards a staircase. “You people are CRAZY! I’m leaving!”

Luffy stretches his arm out to grab him. “Wait! At least tell us where the staircase leading down is!” he demands.

Mr. 3 appears to go through all five stages of grief in an instant before his eyes light up and he’s grabbing Luffy’s hand. “Alright Strawhat! Let’s go together!” he warbles, yanking him along.

Luffy grabs mine in turn, dragging me with him while I grab Buggy. “Uh, dead end?” Luffy points out when 3 just keeps going, seemingly unaware.

“Come with—!” Yeah, him smacking right into said dead end cuts him off pretty well. Or, I say dead end, but…

“Hey, does anyone else think this thing looks… kinda…” I trail off as we all take a few giant steps back, regardless of the horde of creatures at our back. I mean, it doesn’t matter since they’re all coming to a dead stop behind us.

Oh. Oh dear.

“Oh dear *god…”* I whimper. I can all but hear Buggy internally screaming beside me.

“The — the sphinx…” Mr. 3 chokes out in a strangled whisper. “The guardian of the stairs..!”

“Weird lion..?” Luffy mutters. “No… old man..? I thought you said sphinxes were ladies..?”

Whatever the actual fuck it is, it's FUCKING *MASSIVE* and built like a GODDAMN *LOAF OF BREAD* and is ***STARING STRAIGHT AT US.***

It makes a low grumbling growl sound I feel in my goddamn bones, slowly shifting like a moving hill to face us while its fucking wings scrape across the ground. "Noodle…" it rumbles.

"...Noodle..?" we all squeak. All our jaws drop. It stands to its paw feet things. The manticores and scorpions go scattering away behind us.

It lifts a big ol' paw and starts swinging. We scream and fucking *bolt.*

"Pork noodle!" it growls, charging after us and slammings its paws into the ground. "Chinese noodle!"

"WHO TAUGHT IT SO MANY NOODLES?!" Buggy and 3 shriek.

"Vegetable noodle!" it bays, swiping at Luffy and missing by a hair.

"WHAT THE FUUUUUUCK!" I caterwaul, throwing myself to the ground to avoid another swing.

"Ramen!" it roars, all but punching the floor behind us. "Hot men!"

"Me?" Buggy, 3 and I all turn to ask. We all nearly get flattened, but honestly the joke is worth it.

"This thing's tough!" Luffy gasps, tackling me away from another strike.

“Hot-pot noodle!” it yowls.

“I miss Sanji’s cooking!” Luffy whines.

“Me too!” I moan.

Buggy and 3 seem to have come to an accord off to the side, doing that manly hand-clasping thingy. Luffy skids to a stop with an angry sound, just fucking leaping up and above the goddamn sphinx and punching it in the head.

Its jaw slams into the floor, with Luffy landing amongst its flowing white locks, making a howl of rage and pain.

“What’re you pissing it off for?!” 3 screeches. Buggy immediately separates from his feet, which scurry away, so he can fly to higher ground. I yank my gravity upwards because I am NOT being stuck on the ground with this guy. “Wha — WHY CAN ALL OF YOU ESCAPE TO HIGHER GROUND BUT ME?!”

“Salty noodle!” it roars, slamming its paw down onto Mr. 3.

Except Mr. 3 starts cackling like mad a few paces away. “Sike, you stupid beast! It was just a wax clone!” he crows, popping up a whole crop of clones that sneer and smirk at the sphinx as it starts batting at them like whack-a-mole.

Luffy laughs from atop its mane, goading it as it punches into the floor. “Hit that one! No, no, that one!”

Even I can see where this is going a mile away. I send a prayer to god, the Sea, the fucking concept of fate itself, and take a running leap off the platform I was perched on to throw myself towards the thing’s head.

It takes a turn of my gravity to save myself from a future as jam between its teeth, but I manage to crash-land on top of my Captain, who just laughs and wraps an arm around me. “This is kinda fun!” he cheers.

“Sure hope you like the falling, too!” I cry, grabbing onto him tight as that tell-tale crack and crumble of stone pierces the air before the entire ground shifts.

Predictably, the stone underfoot shatters into pieces with all the stomping, and we go crashing through the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Impel Down is fun because it's a nonstop concussive smash to the head with the Psychosis Hammer and every time you think you're gonna have a minute someone says something stupid and you're once again kissing the business end of the Psychosis Hammer like it's your husband returned from war. It's a never ending NyQuil fever dream melding into a 200mg edible drug trip you cannot claw your way out of for the life of you. You're stuck like this. This is how things will be forever.

A moment of silence for imaginary Impel Down guard Greg and his heroic black eye. Anyway that's another strike in the Ed Impersonating Government Personnel book. What's the score up to now?

Chapter 119: Chapter One Hundred and Nineteen: They're Smirking At First Blood

Chapter Summary

> *Levitate - twenty one pilots*
>
> It has been seconds — goddamn motherfucking *seconds* — and I'm already drenched in sweat. "Not to alarm anyone, but I can feel myself becoming evil again," I say calmly. Both Buggy and Mr. 3 look at me incredibly alarmed. Luffy just hops over until he can butt his head into my sternum. "Ow," I say, even though it didn't hurt.

Chapter Notes

> WHOOOOOOP AND WITH THAT WE'VE BROKEN 500K ON THE WORDCOUNT BABES!!! THE MENTAL ILLNESS IS MENTAL ILLNESSING!!! I wish the mental illness would mental illness harder because I would like to have the motivation to write entire chapters in a day again.
>
> You have no idea how fucken sad I am I couldn't go to any of the Canadian tøp shows. I am so unbelievably sad. Also I can rap this entire song flawlessly and I make it everyone else's problem on the reg.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Owowowow! The floor feels like a frying pan!" Luffy yelps, him and Buggy both leaping like fleas on the scorching sands. "And why's it so quiet?"

It has been seconds — goddamn motherfucking *seconds* — and I'm already drenched in sweat. "Not to alarm anyone, but I can feel myself becoming evil again," I say calmly. Both Buggy and Mr. 3 look at me incredibly alarmed. Luffy just hops over until he can butt his head into my sternum. "Ow," I say, even though it didn't hurt.

"Don't be a dumb dumb," he commands.

“Your head left a fucking sweat stain on my shirt,” I complain, squinting at the dark fabric.

“No evil this time, no princesses and no hook guy and no Desert Hellscape Round 1,” my Captain says firmly.

“Yeah alright, no evil this time,” I grumble, swinging my hat up from where it’s been hanging off my back as I pop the singular button on my shirt open and shuck it off my damp fucking arms. “This isn’t real sun and we don’t have to worry about UV exposure, right?” I mutter, tying it around my waist.

“Tell me you don’t call this place Desert Hellscape Round 2 because of *Alabasta,”* Mr. 3 begs, actively melting into a puddle of wax.

“Of course we do,” me and Luffy say in synch, the same ‘you’re stupid’ tone in both our voices. I mean considering it’s quite literally a *desert hellscape* for miles, with just stone block cells and weird spikey beams and big wooden X’s around, I think it’s pretty apt naming regardless.

“Forget I said anything,” he grumbles.

“Damn you, Strawhat! And your stupid Detective! I can’t believe you dragged me down with you again!” Buggy screeches, stomping his feet and grabbing at his hair.

“In our defence, the name of this place literally means ‘force down,’ we’re kinda just following instructions?” I hedge.

“Impel means force?” Luffy asks curiously. I nod affirmatively.

“I hate all of you,” Buggy cries into his hands.

“Dude, your makeup isn’t budging an inch,” I marvel, staring at his sweat-drenched face. “Have you had that on since you got *incarcerated?* I need this fucking brand?”

“Hey, the ugly lady lion is out cold,” Luffy announces, poking the sphinx with the tip of his sandal. There’s a high pitched whistle, and then a fucking bird lances down from the hole and plants itself pin-straight and upright into the surrounding rubble by the beak. “Hey! Grilled bird!” Luffy gasps.

I stare at it blankly for a moment before turning to my Captain. “Don’t eat the legs, beak, bones or the feathers.”

Luffy whoops and Buggy stares at us like we’re crazy. “What is *wrong* with you people?!”

“I guess one of the hummingbirds from the floor above flew into the hole, and got cooked on the way down,” 3 muses, wiping sweat from his glasses and replacing them on his face, only for them to be completely fogged over again in an instant.

“This place is a nightmare,” Buggy weeps.

“Look at the cages,” Mr. 3 says, pointing a dripping hand towards the stone cells of the junction ahead of us. “All of these people once held bounties of over 50 million, and you wouldn’t even be able to tell by looking at them.”

And he’s right. The people we can see through the bars may as well be shriveled up corpses, ragged and so lacking in moisture it makes my skin feel flaky just looking at them. My *god* does this place need some lotion.

“After being forced to endure the rising heat from the Blazing Hell below, and with precious little food and water, they’re reduced to a state of near-death,” he continues, throwing his stupid hair thing back when it flops into his face. “And chances are this isn’t sand at all, just the remains of prisoners who’ve already dried up.”

Me and Buggy slowly look to each other, then down at the sand, and then both gag in unison.

“We need to get out of here quickly, or just like them we’ll become sand beneath someone’s feet in no time at all,” Mr. 3 declares. “In other words, while we still have the sweat to spare!”

“At the very least we should move,” I suggest, eyeing the fucking crucified corpse strung up in the middle of the junction with distaste. “That crash will have drawn a lot of attention, and also we’re standing smack dab in the middle of a trap right now.”

“We are?!” all of the boys shriek, jumping and peering around for said trap.

Luffy brandishes his half-eaten bird beak first like some kind of spear, twisting around with a look of challenge. “Where’s the trap?! Lemme at it!”

“That’s not how traps work, dumbass!” Buggy shouts, smacking Luffy upside the head. “Should we run?! I think we should run!”

“Yeah, let’s run,” I agree, hand already latching into Luffy’s collar.

Mr. 3 makes a weird sound. “Wait, what’s that—”

Yeah the warning was all for naught as a net sweeps up around us, anchored to a giant beam contraption that springs up from the sand, scooping up both us and the still unconscious sphinx. And by that I mean us little guys get fucking mashed into the thick wiring of the net and crushed by the sphinx’s bigass body.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” I yell, hand still clutched on Luffy’s shirt.

“It’s made of steel!" Luffy grunts, gnawing with the net between his teeth.

“Damn it all! It’s got Seastone in it!” Buggy wails.

“We’re gonna get tortured for attempting to escape!” Mr. 3 moans. “We’re doomed!”

The speed with which the horde of executioner-adorned pitchfork-carrying guards arrive is genuinely fucking impressive, all things concidered. A number of Blugori file in with them, and I’m not loving this whole fly-in-a-glue-trap dynamic them all staring up at us implies.

“We’ve captured the escapees! Make sure to get all four of them with Seastone cuffs!” someone yells through a Transponder.

“Doooooooomed,” Mr. 3 cries.

“This is the *worst.* You people are the *worst,”* Buggy whimpers.

“My spine is super not loving this,” I groan.

“Lemme out, lemme out!” Luffy growls, chomping on the net before pausing. “Wait, who the hell’s this guy?!”

“‘This guy’ is Saldeath,” the man himself answers, all like… 3 feet of him. He’s a tiny little shit in a big white hat with horns and a matching three piece suit, with a pitchfork in hand and fucking bat wings on his back? What *is* this guy???

“Salt breath? You should probably change your diet,” Luffy recommends. I burst out laughing.

“NO! That’s not what I said at all!” he snaps back. “I’m *Saldeath!”*

“Right. Sardine head,” Luffy ahs. I start laughing harder.

“NO! GET IT RIGHT! What’s wrong with you?!” he yells before reigning in his composure. “At any rate, there’s no point in resistance. You’re in a highly secure underwater prison, so needless to say there’s nowhere for you to run.” Saldeath huffs out a smug breath. “You’re fortunate *I’m* the one who captured you. There’s four other guards prowling around on the floors below this, and they’re *demons.”*

“He’s right! I don’t want to face them or the Chief Warden!” Buggy gargles out.

It’s at this lovely point the mass practically pinning us to the sides of the net starts to shift. “Oh sweet mercy,” I mutter, tightening my hold on Luffy’s shirt.

“Vongole bianco!” the sphinx growls lowly, its voice rumbling directing into our bodies in a way that feels downright weird.

“C — Chief! The sphinx!” one of the guards shrieks, terribly redundantly.

The sphinx starts thrashing wildly, all of us stuck in the net with it screaming, as the guards hoist their spears and pitchforks up while looking freaked the fuck out by the damn thing. “Not good! The net is going to break!” Saldeath shouts. “Don’t let them escape, especially those two unidentified prisoners!”

It’s nice to know my ruse is still working, if nothing else.

Of course, that’s when the sphinx’s ceaseless flailing actually manages to break through the net, tearing the thing to fucking pieces and sending us all plummeting to the ground. “Soup spaghetti!” it howls as we go down.

“Whooooooop!” Luffy cheers are we’re freed, and I use my grip on his shirt to yank him towards myself.

“Let’s bowl!” I holler, hurling him at the guards and Blugori lunging for us. Luffy goes crashing into them in a flurry of punches and kicks, blowing a massive hole in their defence. “Strike!” I laugh, touching down on the ground in a roll, ducking under flying pieces of rubble and one of the sphinx’s paws as it arcs over my head from the thing squirming around in the sand.

I kick out of the roll to skid through the sand on one knee, both guns out and firing into the guards at the periphery of Luffy’s range. I come to a stop at Luffy’s back, lowering my guns to shake sweat off my face. I’m gonna need the mother of all showers after this.

“Where’d the other two go?” Luffy asks confusedly, both of us pausing and swivelling our heads around until we catch sight of Buggy and 3 atop the beam contraption the net was attached to. “Ahhh, did they climb the net?”

I shoot a Blugori that comes at us in the face with an impact shot, sending its body into a row of guards while Luffy waves at the convicts.

“Gyahahaha! Say hi to Ace for me, will you?! Let’s all have a drink together if you get out of this alive!” Buggy cackles down at us.

“Make sure you keep up that brilliant distraction, idiots!” Mr. 3 crows.

“Aw man,” Luffy whines under his breath. “Ok, see you! Thanks for helping us get this far!” he hollers up with a smile.

Both men look like they take actual psychic damage from that. “I think you’re dickholes for this!” I call up, hoisting a middle finger. “Good luck! I’m rooting for you!”

“Don’t let your guard down! Get those two!” Saldeath orders from… somewhere. I dunno, we’re kicking up a lot of sand and shit and the guy is fucking tiny, sue me.

“We don’t have time to stand around fighting all these weirdos!” Luffy huffs, running at me. I toss my pistols in the air and crouch so I can give him a leg up. I send him over my head with my hands, nearly getting clobbered by his other sandal in the process, and catch my guns just in time to shoot the guys who had been on Luffy’s tail.

I hear the distinct sound of someone getting absolutely bodied by my Captain before it’s overshadowed by that dumbass sphinx roaring and trying to start shit again. “Jesus Christ,” I mutter, taking out another guard.

“There’s no way this guy *isn’t* Strawhat, right?!” one of the guards cries, immediately before getting punched so hard in the face his head nearly falls off. Yeah, I think it’s time to take the L on my ruse.

Then Luffy’s hand is latching onto my arm. I blink wide at it for a second, then start screaming as I’m reeled through the air towards my Captain. It’s important to note that while he’s doing this, he’s also running and jumping and kicking off people’s faces. So. Yeah.

I’m suddenly hurled into the air, screaming louder, while Luffy fucking grabs a Blugori and just??? Catapults it into the crowd???

“I told you to warn me when you were gonna do shit like this!” I yell, pointing my pistols and shooting while I start falling.

“My bad!” Luffy shouts back, his arm darting back and wrapping several times around my stomach and fucking *swinging me into a crowd of guards.*

“LUFFY!” I screech, no other option but to just tense up my legs and kick through these poor sons of bitches like the fucking bullet in Mario Kart. I’m headed right for the wall of a cage several stories up, so I frantically flip my gravity to kill my momentum.

I manage a — if not clean — *decent* landing on the wall, crouching down and keeping my gravity anchored that way while I grab onto Luffy's arm and yank hard. He's fucking laughing as he goes rocketing up past me, sticking the landing on the roof of the cell and pulling me up after him.

I smack him upside the head as we go running, Luffy letting go of my stomach to grab my hand. "Combo moves are discussed PRIOR to execution, and will not include SWINGING ME INTO YOUR OPPONENTS!" I shriek, throwing a handful of sand that got stuck in my hair at him.

"Sorry, Ed!" Luffy laughs sheepishly, grinning as we sprint.

———

"It's so hot!"

"I know."

"I'm hungry!"

"I know."

"I thought we were supposed to be going down?"

"I know!"

The heat is making me evil again. In my defense, I was very upfront with my warnings. Heat just *does something* to a motherfucker like me.

“Hey, is—”

“Luffy, I really *really* don’t wanna snap and yell at you right now because I’ll break down crying, so please please *please* don’t give me a reason to,” I cut him off to plead.

He gives me a nearly apologetic look, big-eyed blinks and all, and a half-awkward laugh. “Ok, sorry Ed.” There’s blissful silence for all of ten seconds before he breaks it. “I just thought you should know about the guy with the gun up there,” Luffy says quickly, like it’ll give me less time to be upset.

I just stare at him blankly as he points up. I follow his finger to the guy with the gun up on one of the tower cage things, who slowly lifts his head from the telescope he was watching us through. I shoot the telescope before I shoot him, just because it makes me feel better.

“Do you feel better now?” Luffy asks earnestly.

I tilt my head assessingly as we continue to run up this bigass staircase that I’m praying to god leads somewhere worthwhile. “Yeah,” I decide. “Yeah, that helped.”

“Oh, good, because there’s a bunch more gun guys for you to shoot!” he cheers, pointing to the top of the staircase.

“SONOFAFUCK—”

So anyway, I start blasting. Luffy all but football tackles me out of the way of the fucking Seastone nets these assheads are shooting, dodging and weaving as they embed themselves in the wall and I continue to fire from where I’m basically slung over his shoulder, screeching expletives all the while.

“Enough with the Seastone nets!” Luffy whines, making completely ridiculous shapes to avoid us getting hit.

“Two more guys!” I call, trying to keep my arms steady as he bobs and ducks around the projectiles. “Fucking — STOP MOVING SO I CAN SHOOT YOU IN THE HEAD!” I holler at the remaining guards.

Luffy makes a noise. “Uh oh—”

Yeah then we both get slammed into the ground by the sphinx’s stupid massive paw. “Mother*fucker,”* I wheeze, half suffocating as Luffy nearly liquifies into the less than plentiful space beneath me. “My *spinnnnneeeeeeee—”*

“The ugly lady lion is gonna eat your head!” Luffy shrieks, frantically wiggling as I can literally feel the thing’s mouth bearing down towards us teeth first. Oh this is the shittiest way to die ever. Being eaten by a bread-shaped ugly lady lion with Luffy screaming in my ear.

“Hey, wait a minute, lion!” a horribly familiar voice yells. The sphinx pauses. I twist my head around. “I’m here to save you!” Zoro shouts down from above.

My heart stops and stutters in my chest for a moment before the goofy and downright deranged grin on Zoro’s face registers, and an equal mix of crushing disappointment and chest-swelling elation floods my veins.

I mean, it’s also the pose. The pose kinda gives it away. “Zoro?!” Luffy gasps, sounding so fucking happy it makes my stomach hurt. I mean, it’s also the being crushed thing. The being crushed thing kinda hurts too.

“Nooooot quite!” he cackles, leaping off the cell tower he was perched upon to deliver a harsh ballet kick to the sphinx’s head. There’s something terribly disconcerting about *Zoro* being the one doing the kicking for once, I gotta say.

Anywho, me and Luffy are abruptly free from being pinned as the sphinx crashes to the side. I stumble to my feet and pull Luffy with me while he stares up at the newcomer with bewilderment. “That’s not Zoro, but he does sound familiar,” he pants.

“Been a while, Straw-boy and little Detective! Did you miss me?!” Bon Clay hollers, tears and snot flooding down his face as it turns back into *his* face.

“BON!” me and Luffy whoop, arms going up in the air.

“I’d still rather have Zoro, but I’m glad you’re alive!” Luffy adds.

“I’m also a little disappointed by the Zoro thing, but this works too!” I tack on.

“Open fire!” one of those last two guys I missed shouts.

“Piss off!” Bon Clay hollers, launching himself at them and sending both flying. “Bastards! Stay away from my friends or things are about to get very ugly!”

I clap and cheer because he’s doing a great job. The mood is a little dampened by the STUPID FUCKING SPHINX GETTING BACK UP BECAUSE THE UNIVERSE HATES US.

“Good sphinx! Mount the counter attack!” Saldeath orders from… somewhere? I didn’t even see the fucker arrive, and I can’t help but pity his short ass.

There really is enough pent up rage in my body that beating the everloving shit out of the sphinx with Luffy and Bon does barely anything to abate it. Oh I’m gonna *lose it* later, I can already feel it. I pity the poor shit on the other end of that.

“That should keep it out for now!” Luffy announces cheerfully, standing on top of the mountain of bruises on the sphinx’s head.

“My hand hurts,” I announce sullenly, suddenly regretting just fucking punching the thing like a bully on the tarmac that wanted his lunch money.

“Force is the best medicine for a wild beast, no joke!” Bon announces, pirouetting on the fucker’s limp body.

Saldeath just makes very upset sounds from… somewhere.

Anyway, I turn down towards Bon Clay to point at him and start squealing. He does the same, and in an instant me and Luffy are both throwing ourselves at him while all three of us cry. He somehow manages to hoist us both in his arms while he starts spinning, screeching all the while.

“I totally thought you were dead!” Luffy wails, swinging his legs around because Bon is fucking *tall* and we’re nearly 3 feet off the ground. “I thought you died in our place, you big jerk!”

Bon lets lose one of his goofy deranged laughs. “As if! Okama never die, nooooo joke!”

“Bonny! I missed you so much!” I whine, squeezing him as tight as I can. “Wait — no I know a Bonney I can’t use that nickname I take it back.”

“The legal system calls me Bentham, honey, you can make something of that,” he tuts, setting us both on our feet and swiping two delicate fingers under his eyes, his makeup *also* somehow in perfect condition. Do these fucking people all share some magic supplier I don’t know about?

“Benny it is!” I cheer, cleaning my face and Luffy’s with significantly less grace.

A few haunting notes of flute music invade the air and we all turn to it with knees bent and game faces on. “Blugori! Don’t let them escape!” Saldeath orders between notes, his

pitchfork apparently also a woodwind instrument? At least I can see the fucker now, the crowd of Blugori at his back giving him away.

“By the way, Straw-boy and little Detective, I hear you’re heading down to Level 5!” Bon says with so much more pep than anyone in a place this warm should have.

“Level 6, actually,” I correct as the Blugori start closing ranks around us.

Bon makes a long drawn-out ‘ahhhhh’ sound. “Of course, Level 6 — *LEVEL 6?!”*

“I mean, we’re going through Canada but Worse anyway, so technically you’re right!” Luffy chirps, rolling out his shoulders and settling his centre of gravity lower while eyeing the Blugori like they’re lunch. “Think you could show us the way?”

“You know what, sounds good!” Bon cackles, shaking his head and rolling with the punches like a champ as he readies his hands level in front of him. “There’s someone down below I’d eat my foot to meet anyway!”

“And the Wonder Team roster takes another,” I chuckle, actually bothering to take my pistols out with fancy spins this time and level them at dick shooting height (if those things *have* dicks, which I do not in fact know or want to know). “Let’s kick some ass, party people, and don’t bother taking the names!”

———

“...Prisoner No. C9915, also a former Baroque Works agent. Bentham, also known as Mr. 2, Bon Clay,” a male voice pours out of the Black Transponder I nicked from the Jailer’s Room.

“Aw, Benny, they’re talking about you!” I coo, rubbing my pinky between the Hokage’s eyestalks while it repeats whatever call it’s picking up. Honestly, if it wasn’t busy echoing voices I’m half convinced the sweet thing would be purring.

Bon gasps dramatically from ahead. “I’m famous!”

“The two instigators of this incident have been positively identified as Strawhat Luffy and the Detective of the Damned,” the voice continues.

I make a face. “RIP my damn ruse,” I mutter, following behind Luffy as he runs, who’s following behind Bon as he performs jetés like they take no energy at all.

“We’ve been unable to establish contact with the Level 2 Jailer’s Room due to the riot, but it’s been determined the call denying their identity was in fact a ploy by the perpetrators themselves!” the voice says with so much gravity and horror you’d think he was talking about the most heinous crime a person could commit.

“Dramatic bitch,” I huff.

“The instigators and Mr. 2 Bon Clay are currently on the loose and causing havoc in Level 3, Sector N! They appear to be headed for Level 4!” the voice announces.

“Is that where we are?” I mumble, peering around. “I guess if they think we’re headed to Cook Your Darlings in the Boiling Pot of Doom, we must be going the right way?”

Ok the name really doesn’t fit into typical sentence structure, but at this point I’m in too deep to back down on it.

“Not to worry, mon petit Détective!” Bon cackles, doing some crazy looking spin kick twirl thingy. “I’m absolutely positive we’re headed the correct direction, no joke!”

“I trust you implicitly!” I cheer, lifting the snail closer as the voice starts explaining about the riot Buggy and Mr. 3 incited. “At least this explains why the Blugori fucked off,” I comment, peeking over my shoulder as the voice mentions them being redirected to the riot.

“Why was I not informed of this situation earlier?!” a different voice demands in a growl.

Bon twists his head around at it and makes a queasy face. “That would be the Head Warden Magellan,” he squeezes out. “That’s a man we need to avoid at all costs — if we run into him down here, we’re done for!”

“Hard agree on the avoidance thing,” I groan. “I am super not willing to deal with his… everything.”

But that also brings up a couple questions. A) how do we get down to Canada but Worse without running into him, and B) am I willing to work around the tradeoff of Luffy not getting bullshit insane poison resistance by not fighting him?

That near-immunity is invaluable for our journey through the New World, but is that insurance policy worth the sheer amount of damage Luffy would sustain here, and the literal *years off his life?*

“What the hell?!” Luffy himself suddenly squawks, slamming a hand out in front of me as we come to a hard stop. “Did you see how he moved just then?! What was *that?!”* I whip my head up and blink out of my distraction, jaw dropping at what’s all of a sudden in front of us.

“T — That’s Minotaurus!” Bon shrieks.

“Fuckin’ balls!” I groan loudly. “Of course it had to be a fucking Jailer Beast!”

Yeah it’s a fuckoff big buff bipedal cow. With a big ol’ spiked mace club. I mean… the striped shorts and chunky belt buckle (which actually kinda slays, low-key) and snot running out his schnoz, plus his stupid little beady eyes, kinda offset the vibe but still.

“What’s a Jailer Beast?! Does he have some kind of ability?!” Luffy asks.

“I don’t like this, I do NOT like this!” Bon croaks out, taking a step back to be side by side with me, his palms poised to strike.

“He’s an awakened Zoan, all the Jailer Beasts are,” I answer, warily but slowly inching my hands toward my pistols as the thing just blinks down at us. “Sorta like berserker Chopper, in a way, but I think they’re stuck like this?”

Luffy gives me a confused look over his shoulder. “Stuck —?”

I don’t get the rest of that sentence. In the blink of an eye Minotaurus has swung his mace, and connected his blow directly to Bon’s head. What’s really great about that is me being directly beside him, lined up like a bowling pin.

Bon slams into me in a violent crash of long limbs, skulls, and the edge of a mace, and we go fucking *airborne.*

Chapter End Notes

It's Booooooooooon! I missed him sm, he is my little angel and I just adore him.

Guess who's already very behind on their school work ✌️ I am my own worst enemy.

Nothing makes me more sure humanity is a lost cause than people having very loud phone calls on public busses. Like girl what are you *doing?* I don't want to hear about how your boyfriend Kevin doesn't buy you flowers enough??? Were you never taught common courtesy and basic decency?????? Where is your situational and spatial awareness?????????
But then I see someone do something goofy on the sidewalk outside the bus window and I'm hopeful about the human race again so it all evens out. But *still.*

Chapter 120: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty: This Is What You'll Get

Chapter Summary

> *Karma Police - Radiohead*
>
> I crash and roll across sandy ground, desperate for only two things; not losing my grip on my lunch and not losing my grip on my guns. I somehow manage both (momentary dry heaving aside), and flop onto my back with a groan.

Chapter Notes

> I'M FIGHTING THROUGH THE BURNOUT WITH MY HANDS AND MY FEET GODDAMNIT!!! I AM KEEPING MYSELF IN THIS SHIT THE BEST WAY I KNOW HOW, WRITING HEARTFELT AND IMPACTFUL MOMENTS WITH ED AND LUFFY. I WILL *NOT* GO ON HIATUS IF I CAN HELP IT BUT SCHOOL AND LIFE BOTH ARE TREATING ME A LOT LIKE I TREAT ED IN THIS CHAPTER.
>
> Anyway I changed a lightbulb and logged into a government website yesterday I finally feel like a real college student.
>
> Also if anyone has a building manual for an A4 Chevy Corvette convertible diecast model you should totally throw it at me. I am STRUGGLING through repairing one for my dad and I am so fucking confused by this thing's chassis lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I have a good long moment of blissful unconsciousness before it slams back into me with the same force as the original blow.

"SON OF A FUCKING *OW!"* I wail, clutching at my head. I'm half mashed into the bars of a jail cell, Bon flailing and screeching beside me. I mean, I think he's screeching? My ears are ringing pretty loud.

Man, that wasn't even a direct hit! Bon took the brunt of the attack and it still hurt like a motherfucker! Girl *fuck this place!*

A shout of my name clears the ringing just as Luffy gets fucking whipped in the skull by Minotaurus's mace. He goes shooting the opposite direction we did, shrieking and slamming his hands over his face.

"Watch out, Straw-boy!" Bon yells, scrambling to his feet and launching himself at Minotaurus as it goes in for another wack at Luffy. He ends up in this crazy upside down backwards kick thing that looks awesome as *fuck,* bashing the Jailer Beast into a cell as Luffy dives and skids out of the way.

I've struggled to my feet and yanked my pistols out to start firing before the bigass cow thing can start retaliating on Bon. It shakes the impact shots like they're fucking nothing — which ouch my confidence — and with a speed that makes my head spin, launches at me and drives it's mace into my stomach.

I crash and roll across sandy ground, desperate for only two things; not losing my grip on my lunch and not losing my grip on my guns. I somehow manage both (momentary dry heaving aside), and flop onto my back with a groan.

Minotaurus is holding Bon down by the neck, with its stupid fucking club raised high to splatter Bon's brains like a damn watermelon. I try to get my eyes to stop rolling around in their sockets long enough to raise my gun, but my Captain has already gone into Gear 2 and blasted that motherfucker so hard it goes soaring up the stairs it came from, bashing a hole in a wall it flies through.

I flop back down into the sand, blowing out a heavy relieved breath and squinting my eyes shut.

"Ed! You ok?!" Luffy asks, panting around the words. I crack open one of my eyes to look at him, crouched over me with his hands on his knees.

"I'm breathin'," I wheeze, shoving my guns back into their holsters and taking Luffy's offered hands to let him pull me up. "Not well, but breathin'. Oooow," I moan, slinging an arm over his shoulders and wrapping the other around my midsection.

“Fuck that guy,” Luffy says matter-of-factly, sliding his hat up onto his head.

“Fuck that guy,” I agree, wiping blood off his brow with the back of my hand. My poor fingerless gloves are going THROUGH IT. “Benny, how you holding up?” I call.

“I… I think I almost died,” he groans, flat on his back with an arm splayed over his forehead. “I saw the heavenly garden of Okama Way. You *huff* sure are strong, Straw-boy! I doubt that monster is down for the count, but it sure must be hurt.”

“I hope it lands on its head and gets its horns stuck in a wall,” I grumble. “And for good measure, gets hit on the ass with its club when it lands.”

Bon makes a weird pant/wheeze sound as he sits up in the sand, rubbing a hand against his bloody and sweat-smeared skin with a despondent expression. “Ahhhh, this is just awful! My makeup is ruined! Cosmetics, I need cosmetics stat! Plus some pointe shoes, and some clothes, and some weapons, and …” he pauses and his face slips into a sparkly smile, “some drinks, some tears, and some Okama Way!”

“I’ll pass on the tears, but I’ll drop if food doesn’t happen soon,” Luffy bemoans, rubbing his stomach.

“At this point I’m willing to drink tears,” I mutter, sticking my dry ass tongue out.

“Don’t worry your pretty little heads, my darlings! The way down to Level 4 from here is easy as pie!” Bon comforts, already back on pointe and dancing like he has energy to spare.

“Oh thank god,” I groan, slumping my head onto Luffy’s shoulder as he perks up.

“Are you serious?” Luffy asks excitedly.

“No joke! You see that great big wall?” he asks, indicating which one he’s talking about. “Just climb this thing all the way to the top!”

“Just up there? No problem!” Luffy cheers, trotting up and stretching his arms upwards.

“Don’t just barge in, you’ll need to watch your step,” Bon advises.

Luffy does not watch his step, and cooks his fingers on the hot ass stone. “OW! What the hell, I feel like I just fried my hand on a skillet!” he yelps, blowing on his bright red fingers.

“Frying on a skillet? You’re not too far off! Is your hand ok?” Bon questions.

Luffy nods, shaking his hand out with a pout. “Jumping, then?” I ask, looking up at the open port of the wall warily, already dreading just how hot it’s gonna get.

“On three!” Bon announces.

Ok look, I’ve got very little love in my heart for anything standard issue, Marine issued, or heaven forbid *both,* but I have to admit these boots hold up exceptionally well considering we’re basically standing on a GIANT FUCKING FRYING PAN.

“I wanna go home,” I moan as we’re hit with a solid wall of heat, peeking through the open archway into the godforsaken level of Cook Your Darlings in the Boiling Pot of Doom. You know what — if I had to picture hell, a giant column of smoke being dispersed above us by a giant fan in what essentially equates to a big fuckoff oven would probably be pretty close.

“Do we have to go *down into the smoke?!* It’s bad enough just up here on the ledge!” Luffy whines, shielding his face with his arms.

“Alas, this is the Blazing Hell you were so eager to visit. And double alas, it lives up to its name quite accurately,” Bon laments.

“Well damn. What’s down there..?” Luffy mutters, mopping sweat off his face.

“You were pretty close when you likened it to a skillet, and even closer with the Boiling Pot of Doom statement. At the bottom of this level is a boiling lake of blood and a sea of flames!” Bon explains gravely, hopping off the ledge onto the walkway circling the rim of this hellhole.

“I hope they’re cooking something awesome down there besides prisoners, cause this place *sucks,”* Luffy huffs.

“Seconded,” I mutter, swiping my wrist across the back of my neck.

“We can jump down from here if you really want, but if we drop in the wrong spot it’ll be much worse than simply landing in hot water! Just descending down any further than this is putting your life on the line!” Bon continues, face set in a hard line.

Luffy stares down into the smoke for a moment before turning to Bon. “You said there was someone you wanted to see, right? Just who is it that’s worth risking your life like this?”

Bon’s face immediately cracks into a grin. “They call them the Miracle Worker. They were imprisoned on baseless charges, and their friends call them Iva! They’re the Queen of Kamabakka Kingdom, the pink paradise of the Grand Line! They’re the leader of the queer folk, the Queen of all queens!” he crows, dancing around with a starry-eyed look on his face.

I take my hat off for a moment to hold it over my heart. “Truly, and icon and hero to gays everwhere. The queer person of all time. If ever one was mother,” I say solemnly.

“Your mom is the Queen of all queens?” Luffy asks with a gasp.

“I — no. In this context mother is used like a nickname or pet name, like calling someone baby. They aren’t really your baby, it just implies they’re someone you care about,” I clarify. “In this case, mother means constantly serving ungodly amounts of cunt to the point they’re the blueprint.”

Luffy ah’s and nods his head. “So they’re like… *everyone’s* mother,” he says sagely.

I blink back tears and lift his hand to kiss it. “If I hadn’t married you already—” I say wobbly.

“I want to see them face-to-face if only for a moment, but maybe we can set them free!” Bon says excitedly, his hands clasped together and a dream look on his face before he blinks. “Wait you’re married—?”

We all pause at the distant sounds of hysterical screaming. “What’re the odds that won’t be our problem?” I ask rhetorically.

“Same as the stealth plan working,” Luffy answers anyway, squinting into the cloud of dust bulldozing towards us.

“Start running?” I prompt.

“Start running,” Luffy confirms.

We actually end up timing it pretty well, since by the time we’re going full tilt we’re at the same speed as Buggy and Mr. 3 in their mad dash away from Minotaurus. “Are you kidding me? We just got rid of that thing! Why are you leading it right to us?!” Bon shrieks. “And what happened to escaping like you said you would, haaaaaaah?!”

“YOU PEOPLE?! GODDAMNIT!” Buggy screeches at the top of his lungs. He’s got a bunch of knives now. And a rifle. Don’t know where he got those. So.

“I knew you’d change your mind and come with us!” Luffy laughs cheerfully.

“I really was rooting for you guys, but I’m glad you’re here!” I say with a grin and thumbs up.

“FUCK YOU, I HOPE THIS THING EATS YOU ALIVE! WHY THE GENUINE *FUCK* WOULD I WANT TO GO INTO THE DEPTHS OF HELL WITH YOU?!” he wails, clutching at his gorgeous hair. “WE WERE JUST HIDING MINDING OUR OWN BUSINESS, WHEN THIS THING CAME FUCKING *FALLING ON US OUT OF NOWHERE!”*

“Oooooh, *that’s* where it went,” Luffy ah’s.

“OF *COURSE* IT WAS YOU ASSHOLES!” Buggy yowls. “YOU’RE THE ROOT OF EVERYTHING WRONG WITH MY LIFE!”

“I don’t wanna… run anymore!” 3 moans, practically melting as he sprints. “I should… should have just… stayed in my cell!”

“If it’s come to this, there’s only one thing to do,” Buggy mutters to himself. “Strawhat and Coin’s kid, do you remember my special Buggy Ball?! The powerful and flashy weapon I used back when we first met to blow up half the town and scare the *shit* outta you and your friends?!”

“No,” Luffy says immediately and unhesitantly.

“Dude, at least *try* to remember my name,” I request dismally.

Buggy’s dejected face is both hilarious and deeply saddening. “Ah… I see… Well uh, the Buggy Ball is this big and powerful cannonball… It’s kinda like my special weapon… You

know… the Buggy Ball… named after me…" he explains, slow and subdued.

"Alright so no one knows what that is but the point is you must have a lot of confidence to put your *name on it!"* 3 shrieks, voice climbing higher and higher as he goes.

"YES! And it's just as powerful as ever, only now I've condensed it down small enough it can be concealed on a person's body!" Buggy exclaims. "The Muggy Ball!"

"Who the hell is Muggy?!" Mr. 3 yells accusingly.

"Girl when the fuck did you have time to make *explosives* in here!?" I ask incredulously.

"Nevermind all that shit!" Buggy shouts, spinning on his heel and thrusting a leg out. "Take this you stupid son of a bitch!" Then a projectile shoots out the bottom of his shoe (I'm not thinking too hard about how that one works) right at Minotaurus's bleeding nose.

The explosion is… immense and somehow manages to make this hellhole even hotter.

"Right on!" me and Luffy cheer at the same time.

"Nice going!" Bon calls.

"WHY THE FUCK IS THAT THING STILL CONSCIOUS?!" 3 shrieks.

It's because the universe will do anything in its power to piss me the FUCK off and also because reality is nothing but a big middle finger in the face of fate. Or something.

"I'm out of fucks to give!" I yell, turning to Bon. "Benny I can make you spin super fucking fast, let's GO!" And I hold out my hands.

Bon's mouth stretches into a wide grin, then he clasps his hands around my forearms. Bon starts swinging the both of us around and doing goddamn *acrobatics,* leaving me holding on for dear life while I rotate us like a fucking aerotrim — or a gyrosphere, ironically enough.

It's through sheer fucking spite I keep my head straight enough I know where I am, spatially speaking. Bon takes us into a leap, and I swing him down on top of Minotaurus's head in a cracking kick.

He uses the momentum to propel us behind Minotaurus, and on the arc over I catch Luffy's eyes as Mr. 3 coats his hands with pillars of wax. I let Bon swing me into the stupid cow and send it hurtling towards Luffy and his wax gauntlets.

The hit is fucking *consussing,* and sends that mutated bovine sailing over Bon and I, *absolutely* unconscious this time. The floor rattles beneath our feet as it slams into the ground and carves a trench, skipping once, then twice, then giving a final twitch before it lays still.

"Rest in *shit,* asshole," I huff, cracking my neck and throwing a middle finger back at the monstrosity.

The guys all start jumping around and cheering, because of course they do. "Whoooooop! We beat the monster cow thing from hell!" they cry in unison.

"Alright! Let's go right for the bottom of Cook Your Darlings in the Boiling Pot of Doom!" Luffy hollers.

We did a great job! Too great of a job.

Buggy makes a strangled sound. "Alright you *maniac,* I'm gonna ask you this one more time," he grits out. "After all that, do you honestly still want to go down to Level 4?!"

“Yup! I knew you’d come around to coming with us!” Luffy says cheerfully.

“There’s no way you’re getting me down there, I’ll completely melt away!” Mr. 3 shrieks.

“Hey guys,” I try to interrupt.

“That is a boiling cauldron of blood and fire, DOES THAT SOUND LIKE A GOOD TIME TO YOU?!” Buggy screeches. “What part of ‘Burning Heat Hell’ is not clicking in your empty head?! We are NOT going down there!”

“Why not?” Luffy asks plainly.

“WHY DO YOU THINK?!” Buggy and 3 yowl in unison.

“Guys, the floor,” I try again.

“We want to go UP not *DOWN!”* 3 adds.

“Escape is the goal, *down is the WRONG DIRECTION!”* Buggy shouts.

“Ugh, a big chunk of blood came out of my nose,” Luffy grimaces, wiping it on his shirt.

“YOU’RE NOT EVEN LISTENING!” the two men scream, stomping their feet.

“Guys. Hey guys. The floor is kinda—” I try once more.

“Just let them go, sweetpeas. God knows they simply lack the balls to go further,” Bon sighs.

“WHOSE NOSE LOOKS LIKE A BALL?!” Buggy yells.

“That isn’t even close to what I said! Bah, forget this, I’ll just keep spinning!” Bon proclaims, doing just that.

“Anyone else notice the ceiling getting higher?” Luffy asks.

“You know, now that you mention it, there’s this weird rumbling sound too,” 3 agrees, tilting his head.

“The floor is collapsing,” I deadpan, staring flatly at the four of their faces as they spin to me in shock and horror.

And the floor collapses.

“WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY ANYTHING SOONER?!” Buggy demands. I attempt to punch him without removing my feet from the crumbling platform of rock we’re currently plummeting towards the boiling sea of blood on. “My Muggy Ball was so powerful it caused the floor to collapse!” he wails.

“No, me and the little Detective’s spinning kick did it!” Bon counters.

“My punch totally destroyed the floor!” Luffy proclaims.

“No no no, my Wax Wax powers — oh, wait no, it really didn’t do much…” Mr. 3 trails off.

“THEN SHUT UP!” the other three yell.

***"ALL** OF YOU SHUT UP!"* I roar louder than all of them. They all shrink back. "ALL OF YOU DID IT, AND IN CASE YOU FORGOT, *WE ARE FALLING INTO HELL!"*

———

There's a long moment of just static and the angelic chorus of angels in my ears. Then the shouting registers.

I blink my eyes open, tilting my face off the floor — when did my face get on the floor? Whatever. I clumsily reach up to rub at my stinging cheek and squint bleary eyes at my surroundings.

The first thing I get is an eyeful of red. I scream and lash out to hit it. The red moves back with a yelp that breaks through the static and angels and I blink again as the world comes back into focus.

"What the hell was that for?!" Buggy shrieks, holding his hands protectively over his nose.

I blink twice. I'm on the ground of some kinda walkway with Buggy and Mr. 3 crouched over me, Bon a ways away with his back to me and Luffy a little further beyond that. "Wha..?" I mutter, going to push myself up and suddenly becoming hyperaware of just how fuCKING HOT THE GROUND IS *OH MY GOD*—

I scramble to my feet, terrible idea based on the black spots that take up my vision as I nearly fall right back down, frantically waving my hands like they caught fire. It takes another long moment before I blink back to awareness with Buggy holding me upright, looking downright indignant that he is.

"What the fuck happend?" I groan, pressing the heel of my hand into my temple and squinting my eyes shut before blinking them back open.

“Your stupid ass tripped jumping onto the walkway and wacked your stupid big head on it!” Buggy growls, grabbing my shoulders and righting me so he can let go.

I give him a half-hearted thumbs up, shaking my head lightly and blinking more. “Hmmmmm, aaaaaalrighty,” I mumble. “If I wasn’t concussed before, I *definitely* am now. Is this karmic comeuppance for shooting down all those snails? I know they were just doing their job but daaaaaaaaaaaamn.”

“Ed! Do you want food?! I can smell food, can I go get you food?!” Luffy hollers from further down the walkway, jumping and practically vibrating in place.

I hum high in my throat, swiping my fingers around my face and into my hairline. “Sounds faaaaaaaaantastic, I would kill for some McDonalds right about now,” I answer, albeit sluggishly.

“I don’t know what that is but I’ll get you something good!” Luffy promises, spinning on his heel and taking off. “Don’t move I’ll be back!”

“I’m starving, wait for me Straw-boy!” Bon calls, taking leaps after my Captain.

I roll my head back and squint at Buggy. “Did you save me from falling in the Boiling Pot of Doom?” I ask curiously.

Buggy scowls. “...Maybe,” he grumbles, jerking his head to the side.

My face breaks out into a smile. “Awwwwww, thanks Buggy! In another life we could have been like weird cousins,” I drawl, flopping forward onto his shoulder. “Or would we be like… step-siblings? *Fuuuuuck* I gotta ask Coin this shit.”

“Being around you is like being trapped in a never-ending nightmare and I am willing to hit myself several times in the face to wake up,” he replies, sounding terribly pained.

I pat him reassuringly on the back. “Aw, it’s ok Buggy, I know you care.” He makes more strangled screeching sounds while his hands twitch in and out of fists. I frown into the middle distance, eyes drooping half-shut. “I feel like I’m forgetting something important…” I mutter, pushing off Buggy so I can stroke my chin.

“Do you think they have alcohol in the kitchen?” Buggy asks 3 eagerly.

“Are you crazy?!” 3 hisses back, eyes darting around nervously. “This place is bound to be crawling with guards any minute! We should *hide!”*

I frown at him. “But Luffy said not to move,” I say matter-of-factly.

Both men facepalm. “Are you stupid? Did your concussion make you stupid?” Buggy asks condescendingly.

“Don’t be mean,” I whine.

“Don’t be *an idiot!”* 3 hisses. “Do you *want* to get caught?! We need to—”

Maybe he has a point, actually, because down the way Luffy was running there’s a lot of yelling and stuff. I blink slowly in that direction. “I’m supposed to do something about that, right?” I turn to ask the guys. They both stare at me.

“We don’t have time for this!” 3 shrieks before turning to whisper to Buggy, probably louder than he meant to. “Do we just leave them here?”

Buggy stares for a long moment. I wave, because that feels right. “Damnit!” he yells, reaching forward and yanking me by the wrist.

“Oh, are we going now?” I ask, and that’s about the last thing I remember for a couple minutes. I vaguely remember running, and climbing? And there was totally some shouting a couple times, maybe some gunfire, though I couldn’t be sure from who.

Between one blink and the next I’m back to being… conscious? Present? Whatever you wanna call it. I slow from the jog I was apparently in and take a confused look around. “Wait, what the fuck was I doing?” I question the hot air.

The hot air doesn’t answer, but Buggy — who was in front of me with Mr. 3, who could have guessed— does. “Why are you stopping, idiot?!” he hisses quietly, eyes darting around like he’s scared of something jumping out at him.

“Where the fuck am I?” I ask confusedly.

“Oh my god it’s *brain damage,”* Mr. 3 sobs nonsensically.

“Running for our lives?” Buggy says slowly in a ‘you goddamn moron how could you possibly forget that’ kind of tone.

I do a slow 180 to assess the current situation. We seem to be ⅔ of the way across a walkway suspended above the Boiling Pot of Doom, much higher than we were last time I checked. “Wait, where’s Bon and Luffy?” I ask incredulously, snapping my head around for the two of them. Bad idea, it sends my brain ricocheting around my skull like a hockey puck.

“We don’t have time for this!” 3 cries, voice climbing in pitch.

I peer over the edge of our walkway and past another below us, past the gently swinging hanging spike block things this place seems so fond of, and spot my Captain. I also spot a dark hulking form with weird… floaty appendages that have my stomach going cold.

“Oh sweet fucking shit, did we leave Luffy down there with *Magellan?!”* I hiss, scrambling closer to the ledge and crouching down.

“Don’t tell me you want to go back down?!” Buggy shrieks with mounting horror.

I look back at him with an even expression. “Where else would I go?” I ask calmly. Mr. 3’s hand smacks into his face again. I look around and down the walkway where I guess we came from, rising slowly to my feet and rolling my shoulders. “This lead below?” I question, gesturing that way.

“I mean — yeah? But — but you’re not really going back down there, are you?!” Mr. 3 screeches, sounding positively panicked.

“Thank you for helping us, and taking me with you even if I gotta go back!” I call over my shoulder as I start jogging down the walkway. “I believe in you guys, I’ll see you topside!”

The pained sounds they make in response to that get drowned out by the thundering sound of footsteps and yelling. I glance down and spot a platoon of guards on the walkway that was below us, grimacing and picking up the pace as one of the executioner-lookin’ fucks seems to clock me.

“Hey! Up there, it’s one of the interlopers!” the guy shouts, pointing his pitchfork up at me. I mean, at least they aren’t paying any attention to Buggy and Mr. 3?

“Fuck fuck fuck,” I mutter under my breath, pumping my legs and beelining for the end of the walkway.

“Get them!” someone else shouts, and then… goddamnit. Yeah a bunch of guards start spilling out of the little archway I was headed for and assumed held a staircase or something that went down.

“Fuuuuuuuuuck,” I curse, skidding to a halt and darting my head around for an escape route. I’m like… 90% sure if I tried using my Devil Fruit right now my head would just kinda… pop like a watermelon between a nice pair of thighs, if you know what I mean. So just jumping and praying is decidedly a no-go.

I start taking steps backwards as the guards move in, pitchforks raised menacingly. I spare a peek over the side of the walkway towards Luffy and curse again. Oh he is absolutely getting his shit rocked by Magellan. Oh shit oh *fuck* I gotta get down there *now.*

I squint over at one of those stupid hanging spike beams and eye the contraption the chains holding it are held by, running through the worlds shittiest Pythagorean theorem with Luffy's current location waaaaay below me.

Yeah, this is gonna suck but it just might be stupid enough to work. If I shoot out the far chain and hold on for *dear life,* I may make it down there alive. Fuck it, no pain no gain.

I take a deep breath and shake out my arms and legs, readying myself as the guards get closer and closer. And just as I'm about to take a running leap at the beam—

The walkway is rocked by an explosion. I trip and my ankle rolls before the stone completely crumbles underfoot, and suddenly I'm in open air.

I mean, the nice thing is that the explosion rocked my head so hard my ears basically went offline save for some fun ringing, and I kinda go blind for a second which I enjoy a little less, but the result is I'm so disoriented for a chunk of the fall I don't even notice how much it hurts! Yay!

Less yay is the fact I'm disoriented and falling to my death. Which is… yeah. Not yay.

I reach for my Devil Fruit powers with a grip that feels oil slick, sliding off the gears and vinyls and galaxies just beyond my foggy grasp. Nothing catches.

Or at least, nothing catches until someone latches onto my wrist, jerking my descent to such an abrupt stop it nearly rips my shoulder from its socket. My other shoulder bashes into something solid and I bite down a noise of pain as my head follows immediately after it, the shock traveling up my neck directly into my brain.

I blearily blink my eyes open just enough to get a beautiful view right down into the Boiling Pot of Doom, which is not very beautiful if I do say so myself. I strenuously roll my head around so I can see whoever caught me, and am met by the grinning face of one of the guards *stupid fucking* executioner getups.

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck—

“Sorry sweetheart, did that hurt?” he snickers, slowly pulling me up onto what I think is the walkway that was below the one Buggy, Mr. 3 and I were one. “Don’t worry, Mistress Sadi has dibs on any and all captives, and I’m sure her delicate touch is just what you need.”

I get a couple of slow blackening blinks of consciousness as I’m dropped, face first and unceremonious, onto the bridge. My body goes slack as something is snapped shut around my wrists with a heavy click, and I get one more thought before everything goes dark.

*Fucking **fuck.***

Chapter End Notes

Ed will never not be my punching bag and at this point do I even have to apologize? You have to expect this kind of shit from me by now.

Crazy idea maybe Devil Fruit powers DON'T WORK VERY WELL when one is SEVERLY CONCUSSED. Crazy, I know. Ed is *reeeeeeeeeeally* not having a good time. Lmao imagine getting nerfed offscreen, couldn't be me.

Anywho needless to say next chapter's gonna be kinda heavy. So. Watch out for that.

Chapter 121: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty One: What I’m Able To Withstand

Chapter Summary

Choker - twenty one pilots

I’m just kinda sitting there. Breathing. Shittily.

Chapter Notes

Son of a BITCH y'all I hate to do this to you but I am getting my ass kicked in way I didn't know it could be kick assed. I'm changing the update schedule T0T We're gonna start with every other week and see if that can't save me from the black hole of hell, and if that fails then we'll fall back to once a month.
In my defense, a chapter a week for over year — plus the two chapter a week thing you used to get, god do I miss that — is pretty damn fucking impressive. I'm fucken cool you guys, I just be gettin' tired.

In other news I got fucken HAYMAKERED by a cold this week I have been SO FUCKED UP. I am still not doing good in the slightest. I've also got a canker sore the size of fucking MONTANA in my cheek AND a cut at the corner of my mouth that are making the experience 10x worse. I am gargling saltwater like a motherfucker and slathering honey on that shit like it's toast, pray for me.

Also this chapter was posted so late because I was up until 5 AM really fucking wine drunk. Good times.

Anyway this chapter has graphic torture of the hitting, choking and tickling variety. Enjoy! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mercy of all mercies, I don’t come to in the presence of the crazy BDSM lady.

Arguably *bigger* mercy of all mercies, IT’S A TOLERABLE TEMPERATURE. The second consciousness licks into my brain, I put every effort into NOT making it fucking obvious, because honestly…

No, I don't even have a cool excuse or a ‘well it’s stupid that people always give away that they’re away in action movies’ reason, I’m just too damn tired to do anything else but continue breathing laboriously with my eyes closed.

In all fairness it’s always kinda rankled me that people get upset about that, like dude you’re not even *awake* or *thinking* when you first wake up, you’ll show signs of waking before you can think not to unless you’re like. Trained not to? And even then it’s just instincts? Anyway.

I’m just kinda sitting there. Breathing. Shittily.

So here’s all the information I’ve got: I am no longer cooking in my skin, my skin is very bruised and there’s definitely some dried and crusty blood some places, based on that I’ve been out for at least an hour, I am sitting in a really fucking uncomfortable chair, my hands are secured behind my back and the back of the chair with what I’m fairly certain is seastone, my legs are tied to the legs of the chair, based on the acoustics of my breathing I’m in a smallish stone room with no windows, and there is someone else in here.

That one is taken from the second, much steadier pulse of breathing. The good news is it’s just one someone, the bad news is it’s just one someone.

As far as my physical condition goes, my neck fucking hurts from the way my head is hanging which suggests it’s been *more* than an hour since I’ve been here and unconscious, that concussion I’ve got is uh… bad, and my shoulder hurts amongst a hundred other aches and pains.

After what I think is about five minutes of my continued feigned unconsciousness, I’ve got all the information I can get without opening my eyes, and I’m already bored as shit. So, I make the executive decision to wake up.

I start with scrunching up my face and slight twitches of my head, then a quiet groan and attempted movement of my shackled arms. That, predictably, makes the chains of my cuffs rattle and from there it’s only natural to lift my head and squint open my eyes with another pained groan.

The first visual information I get is that this room is dingy as shit. There's two sources of light in the room, one in front and me and one behind, but they seem to be dimmed or hooded or something. I mean, thank god they're not fluorescent. I'll take the little mercies gladly, too.

The second, and most important, is the other occupant of the room. Dead across from my uncomfy ass chair, there's a woman leaning against the wall. A *familiar* woman.

She's recognizable even though she isn't stone this time I lay eyes on her. Head Jailer Domino regards me cooly from her place against the wall, eyes inscrutable behind her sunglasses, hair and hat.

"...Good morning..?" I croak, wincing at the roughness of my throat. "I mean, I think."

She doesn't say anything for a long moment, just continues looking at me. "You want the time?" she eventually prompts.

"I mean, if you wouldn't mind," I ask politely. "I'd check myself but… well, my hands are a little tied."

She doesn't laugh, which is really what stings the most about this scenario. "That does seem to be the case," she responds stoically, not making any kind of move to straighten from her lean against the brick in the slightest.

…Right. Cool.

"So…" I start, tilting my head around to assess the rest of the room. It's pretty damn plain, just a small square with a singular door right beside Domino, some kind of hook beside the door, and the edge of a table behind me. Besides that there's quite literally nothing decorating this place, not even old blood or torture tools.

Fucken lame.

“I am simply stationed here until Mistress Sadi makes her way to see you,” Domino says diplomatically, and my eyes snap back to her.

“That so?” I ask wearily.

“I’m afraid so,” she confirms, not sounding apologetic in the least. “Once she arrives I believe her plan is to torture you until she has all the information the Warden needs, namely how you and your compatriot managed to infiltrate Impel Down, and then continue torturing you until she is satisfied.”

Oh great, that’s not terrifying at all. Lovely.

“And hypothetically, if I don’t give that information up?” I pose, tilting my head back to tip my chin to the ceiling.

Domino regards me silently for a long moment. “Then you’re in for a very long night,” she states solemnly.

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“So, you think I’ll be getting a midnight snack while I’m here?” I question, just to break up the stoic silence this chick seems keen on maintaining. “I’m real hungry, last thing I ate was half a sandwich I nicked from a guard.”

“Most likely not,” Domino replies curtly.

The room returns to silence.

“So do they make you wear the really short skirt or is it personal preference?” I ask.

“Personal preference,” she answers shortly.

Moooore silence.

“Think you could get me a drink or—”

“I’m going to have to ask that you stop talking,” she says flatly.

We return to silence.

———

I shifty around uncomfortably in my cuffs. They’re chafing against my barely healed wrists even through my bandages (which have definitely seen better days) and my shoulders are starting to ache something fierce.

“You’re the Detective of the Damned, yes?” Domino asks, startling me by initiating conversation for the first time.

“...Yeah,” I respond slowly. “That would be me. You want an autograph?”

She shakes her head. “No. I simply wondered what one had to do to gain a moniker like that,” she responds placidly.

I regard her for a moment. “Well,” I start evenly, “one Domino to another, one only gets a moniker like that when the World Government *really* doesn’t like your name.”

Domino opens her mouth to respond, and that's when the door to my cell bangs open in a cacophony louder than anything I've heard since I passed out. I flinch against the grating sound.

Sadi is… well, she's a tall lady with big wavy orange hair wrapped head to toe in pink BDSM gear. What the hell else is there to say about that? "Well well well," she drawls, sweeping into the room like she owns the place. Honestly, she probably does. "I have just been, mmmmh, *dying* to get my hands on you," she purrs, pausing a couple feet away from me and bending down to be more level with my head.

I stare blankly where her eyes should be hidden behind her bangs and ignore the Cheshire grin stretching her painted lips.

Those lips tick into a pout as she straightens back up. "Hm. Seems we'll have to work our way up to the fun reactions." She turns to Domino, who has straightened against the wall to attention, and dismissively waves a hand. "You can go now."

Domino gives her one curt nod, gives me one curt nod, then swiftly exits the room and shuts the heavy door behind herself.

Sadi smiles at me like a shark, all teeth in a way that reveals her lipstick is smear proof. She circles me like a predator, slow dragging steps as I stoically keep my face forward and unreactive to her shit.

"Let's start simple," she says brightly, circling back in front of me with a whip clutched in her manicured hands. "I'll even play nice if you, mmmmh, tell me everything without a fuss. Now, how exactly did you get inside the impenetrable fortress of Impel Down?"

I blink once at her slowly. "Teleportation," I deadpan. A solid crack sounds through the room, and it takes a moment for the pain to register before my hand automatically tries to reach up to my face but can't. "You slapped me," I observe, not shocked by any means, but still.

“Answer the question,” she says firmly. “How did you enter Impel Down?”

“A fuckin’ interdimensional dentist dropped me in through a black hole,” I say flatly. She slaps me again.

This continues for a while.

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“I think it’s time for a new question,” Sadi eventually decides, glaring balefully down at me. I scowl back even though it makes my very tender, very sore face hurt. *“Why* did you break into Impel Down?” she asks this time.

I arch my eyebrow at her. “The highly acclaimed catering, why else?” I retort dryly.

Sadi heaves a heavy sigh, but doesn’t make a move to slap me this time. The doubtlessly red skin of my face thanks her, though I don’t. “Your type really are just so…” she trails off, shaking her head with an even heavier sigh. She circles around the back of the chair, and I keep my head looking straight ahead. Her arms snake around either side of me, hands held aloft. “Why did you break in?” she asks again.

“Would you believe it was just for kicks?” I drawl.

She chuckles a little bit. “You think you’re funny, you like to tell jokes,” she observes lightly. “Well, go ahead and laugh. You’ve earned one, mmmmh?”

And then she starts… ticking me. I don’t like it.

I’m ticklish as fuck, its something I’ve said before and it’s something I’ll say again, so I immediately react to that erm, badly. I try to kick out instinctively, which doesn’t work out great with my legs tied to the chair, and the fact she’s behind me. Her fingers dig ruthlessly

into my sides as they spasm and shake along with my chest as laughter is ripped impersonally from my mouth.

And she just keeps going and going and *going and* ***going—***

Just when I think I'm going to pass out from oxygen deprivation, vision going spotty with my complete inability to gasp in a breath around my laughter, she pulls her hands away. My head hangs down as I suck in air greedily, ribs still fluttering through aftershocks as my facial nerves twitch.

"What?" Sadi says with faux concern. "You don't think your joke is funny anymore? Too bad. Why are you in Impel Down?"

I suck in another two breaths before I squeeze my eyes and lift my head back up. "We won season passes in the mail," I hiss out.

Her hands go back on the attack. I convulse in my chair, limbs jerking against their restraints while my howling laughter rackets closer and closer to screaming. Hysterical tears pour down my face as I desperately try to squeeze air between shrieks of mirth, even after I run out of breath for them to make noise and I'm reduced to soundless gaping like a beached fish.

When her hands retreat this time I resort to wretched breaths grasped with the same intensity as on the dock of Lulusia after being dunked in the ocean.

This continues for a while.

———

"I'll give you this, your ability to just *keep being a little shit* is almost, mmmmh, impressive," Sadi huffs some time later. I choke on my own air as she circles back around to the front of me, more a blurry smudge of hot pink from the combined blurriness of tears and whatever else.

“Thank you kindly,” I wheeze back. Fucking shitballs, I knew tickle torture was like, *a thing,* but I didn’t think it would suck this hard. Everything fucking *hurts.*

A renewed spike of panic runs through me and she reaches out and roughly shoves both of my knees apart to hook them on the other sides of the chair, painfully twisting my ankles where they’re tied to the chairlegs.

Sadi grins down at me and I quickly school whatever expression was on my face into a mask of indifference. She lifts one leg slowly, the sharp points of the toe of her heels dragging up my bare calf up to my knee until she slams her foot into the little space on the chair in between my legs. I don’t flinch, but it’s a near thing.

“Why are you here?” she demands, heel planted dangerously close to my crotch, and I have to wonder if she knows I’m not packing the equipment for that threat. Or if that’s what she’s counting on.

I give her an almost bored look, rolling my head back on my neck. “I’m here to swear, make shit up, and suffer all the more for it,” I drawl easily. It’s probably good for her to get an honest answer every once in a while.

“The only people with the privilege of entering the great gaol of Impel Down prison in the hours since your arrival have been a Vice-Admiral and the Pirate Empress Boa Hancock,” she says lightly, all her weight balanced briefly on the chair as her other leg plants itself on one side of the chair close to my own, and one of her hands is placed onto the back of the chair beside my head.

“You’re telling me the hot Empress was here and I *missed her?”* I whine, flopping my head to rest on my opposite shoulder. “Broooo, my luck!” I blink big puppy dog eyes at her sweetly. “Is she still here? Could you arrange a visit?”

Sadi’s other wrist comes to rest on the chair beside my head again, the whip she had in hand earlier hanging down the back of the chair. “No can do, I’m afraid,” she says dejectedly. “What I wouldn’t give to, mmmmh, see a beauty like her in a state like yours.”

I hate her I hate her I hate her I hate her I hate her I hate her.

"Well, back to what I was saying," she says brightly. "How exactly did you break into Impel Down?"

"A long story involving the UN, the prince of a small European nation, a nuclear bomb fit to wipe out all of Manhattan, 37 offshore bank accounts, and a shipment container full of 20,000 pounds of romaine lettuce," I deadpan.

And just like that, she has her whip drawn across my throat and pulls down hard. I choke and jerk, neck sandwiched between her weapon and the back of the chair. She stares down at me impassively as I feel my face change shades, vision once again fading into technicolor spots.

"I really don't have anything better to do than this, for however long it takes," she says pleasantly with a content sigh. "And there's, mmmmh, *nothing* I'd rather be doing."

This continues for a while.

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So. The thing about torture and shit. It kinda gets boring after a while?

I mean, the same questions over and over followed by inflicted pain followed by the same questions followed by inflicted pain in a never ending loop… I mean I'm genuinely running out of material for funny answers at this point. I am scraping the metaphorical barrel.

All that is to say; I am in pain everywhere and I want this crazy bitch to knock it off or I am going to start crying hysterically and not stop until she does.

I mean, she isn't even doing anything insane or genuinely damaging to me — no ripping my nails off, or breaking my fingers, or using that whip of hers for anything other than a garotte, and for all her weirdness she hasn't done anything overtly sexual to me, so…

I'm fucking tired. I'm full body sleep-for-a-week-in-a-near-comatose-state fucking tired. At this point the relief of a nap would be worth spilling at least a couple beans, but…

I'd rather die than rat Hancock out to these people. I know exactly what's at stake for her if I tell this lady anything about our entrance or her involvement. I *refuse* to be just another person to throw her under the bus.

And the other question…

I'm not gonna waste the mental energy justifying that one.

Still, though. "Are you getting tired, hun?" Sadi asks condescending, coiling her whip together in loops as she leans away from me, heel tapping a beat on the chair. "Gosh, this really must be so, mmmmh, hard on you."

I would make a 'that's what she said' joke if I wasn't coughing my lungs up right now.

She tucks her whip away and dips down closer to me again as I cease my hacking and throw my head back to siphon in air from the ceiling. I watch her wearily as she simply studies me for a long moment.

I flinch back as her hands suddenly move before they land harmlessly on my face. My eyes dart across her own, trying to find some kind of indicator of her angle as her manicured nails tap lightly on my skin.

"There is one other thing you can do to make this all stop," she says sweetly, trailing fingernails down my cheek.

I suck in breath and squint at her, chest heaving with effort. “W — what would that be?” I huff out, vocal chords protesting every syllable.

“Repent,” she says simply.

I blink slowly at her. “…What?” I wheeze.

“Repent,” she repeats, the tips of her nails skirting into my hairline. “Repent for your sins of piracy, and renounce your, mmmmh, wicked ways and dastardly leader.”

I stare at her for a moment, breathing heavily. “You... you want me to... renounce my Captain..?” I squeeze out of my throat.

“I do,” she murmurs, hand brushing through my loose curls as she leans down closer to me. “You say a couple pretty little words, and then I can give you a bit of a break, hm?” she promises, sickly sweet and cloying with false sincerity.

Still, I believe her offer.

This is the part where I should lie, make a little speech about the evils of piracy and about how wrong and sorry I am, beg for some form of forgiveness from a higher power. I’m not above begging for my life, not above shelving what little pride I have or debasing myself to the enemy. Skypiea proved that.

But still…

“No,” I whisper, so low it’s barely audible.

“What was that?” she questions, mouth dropping into a frown as she leans in even closer.

“No,” I say louder and more forcefully.

We both regard each other for a long moment.

Then her fingers twist tight into my hair and she yanks my head back *hard.*

“No?” she hisses, her other hand grabbing harshly onto my jaw. “I offer you an out that costs nothing but *words,* and you throw it back in my face? And for what?! Your *integrity?* Your silly little *dream?* Or is this just misplaced pride?!” she snarls out, punctuating her sentences with the tightening of her hands.

I can’t muffle my sounds of pain with the way she’s squeezing my face, eyes clenching shut against the stinging of my scalp and cheeks. “You—” I choke on my breath, “you asked me to renounce my *Captain,”* I grit out accusingly.

I will beg for my life, shelf my pride and debase myself, but I will never — *never* — step on Luffy’s own. I will ***never*** put my loyalty to him in question — not even in a lie or to save my own skin.

“So *what?”* she sneers, nails digging into my skin. I feel her thumbnail pierce into my chin. “What could possibly be so special about him you won’t even dirty his name to save yourself the agony?!”

“What a stupid question!” I cry out, tears breaking through the zipper of my lashes as she yanks my head back even harder. “He’s *everything!* You think sparing myself a little pain is equivalent to spitting on the very idea of him?! You ask of me something tantamount to *apostasy* and have the *gall* to question what makes him special?!”

“You sound ridiculous!” she seethes, nearly nose to nose with me. “He’s just a boy! There’s nothing extraordinary enough about Strawhat Luffy for you to subject yourself to this!”

"Luffy is the man who'll be King of the Pirates!" I scream, straining against her grip to glare at her with everything I have in me, regardless of the tears streaming from my eyes. "My Captain is going to reach the end of the Grand Line and claim the One Piece! So keep his name out of your filthy mouth, you *vainglorious bitch!"*

Sadi furiously and wordlessly screeches, her other thumb digging into my forehead just above my temple hard enough I can tell it draws blood. "Where the fuck do you possibly get this faith from?! Why are you clinging to it so hard?! What is it that holds you so tight a simple demand to *repent* draws such refusal?!"

"The only repenting I'll be doing is at his *feet* for even sullying my ears with this *bullshit!"* I shriek back.

"You just don't get it, do you?" she hisses with a cruel smile on her face. "Your Captain fought the *Warden.* There's no coming back or becoming King of the Pirates from *that."*

"God, you don't get it either," I laugh hoarsely. "You think there's a single thing you can do in here that could do anything more than slow him down? If you really believe that, you're even dumber than I thought."

Sadi punches me hard in the mouth. The taste of copper coats my teeth before I can think about it, the shock of the hit rocketing up through my gums. "These sentiments really would hold more weight if you weren't speaking of a corpse," she sneers. "Do you swear your allegiance to a dead man?"

"A dead man..?" I murmur through blood slick lips. "Whatever gave you that idea?" I smirk up at her with red-stained teeth, a gleam in my eye she seems confused and agitated by. "My Captain won't die. He made me a promise."

Sadi drops her hold of my hair like it burned her, face twisted up in a grimace as she finally removes her foot from the chair and stands tall with her back straight. She glares down her scrunched up nose at me. "No wonder I'm not getting anything out of you, you're certifiably insane."

“If that’s what you want to call it,” I say breezily.

She hums lowly. We stare at each other for another second. Fast as lighting she reaches out and clocks me in the jaw again.

My head goes spinning from the blow, dark spots immediately dancing across my vision. I clutch onto wakefulness with every fiber of my being, fighting desperately not to pass out. I really don’t think I can take any more of this.

“Maybe I’ll send you on your way to hell, have you verify he’s down there yourself,” she says coldly.

“Oh, you’ll kill me?” I choke out mockingly. “Good fucking luck!”

“You think you’re invincible or something?” she jeer contemptuously. “I could kill you right now, what exactly do you think would stop me? How about I start breaking bones until you spill whatever secret it is you think is protecting your precious Strawhat, then send you on your merry way? Or maybe I *will* keep you alive, prolong your reunion with him in the afterlife until I’m satisfied?!”

“I will part with him by death or not at all,” I wheeze, words ripped right out of my chest. “No mortal hand could take me from him, and certainly not *yours*. I’d sooner throw myself into the sea then betray a single *inch* of him!”

“Then you can have it your way!” she curses, yanking her whip back out and rearing back to hit me with it.

I flinch hard and squeeze my eyes shut, bracing myself for the pain. It… doesn’t come.

Instead of the deafening crack of a bullwhip, the sounds of the heavy door creaking open fill the room. “Erm — I’m sorry to interrupt Mistress Sadi,” a voice squeaks. I peek an eye open

and look to the guard standing nervously in the doorway. “There’s a call for you, they said it’s urgent.”

Sadi slowly lowers her whip with a snarl etched into her mouth. “This had better be good,” she growls, then looks towards me with one more odious glower before stalking out of the room, nearly stomping the poor guard’s foot flat before he squeaks again and swings the door shut.

I breathe heavily, alone in the room for a very long moment.

“...Fuck,” I wheeze, chin dropping to my chest as the wave of vertigo I had been holding off crashes over me, dragging me kicking and screaming into unconsciousness.

_____

Travelling with The Boy is… weird.

He’s an idiot, for one. And while I’m secure enough to say I’m a little clumsier than your average person, this motherfucker takes the fucking cake. It’s like he can barely remember the dimensions of his body, knocking into trees and falling into ditches like it’s his goddamn profession!

*“What is **wrong** with you?!” I seethe, dragging The Boy up out of a tangle of vines and bushes for the eighth time.*

“It’s not my fault!” The Boy whines, shaking leaves out of his hair.

“Are you sure, because I think the bird that used to live in that tree you knocked down might disagree!” I hiss, righting him and pushing him forward to walk in front of me. Easier to save him from impaling himself on a sharp rock that way.

I slowly relax as we continue our trek, no catastrophic incidents occurring until I'm more concerned with tracking our course than saving that idiot from himself. I spy the sun through the thick foliage above us, then look back to my compass, then return my sight to the path stretched out before us.

"So why aren't you a huge monkey?" I ask bluntly.

The Boy doesn't miss a beat in his steps as he shrugs. "I dunno," he says simply. "I can't seem to stay transformed, or I have trouble controlling it since like... I dunno. Since I ate the wish, probably."

"...You think there might be some correlation there, genius?" I strangle out, resisting the urge to strangle ***him.***

The Boy seems to think for a second. "Oh, wow, you're probably right!" he laughs, carefree and fucking ***infuriating.***

I choke down my screams while my hands twitch in and out of fists, all relaxation from the easy walking lost with the wind. "So the whole monkey thing is like…" I trail off, making weird gestures.

He looks over his shoulder at my movements with his eyes creased in a smile. "...Not permanent?" he fills in, tone teasing.

"Not the default," I rephrase.

The Boy shrugs again. "Nah. I like it a lot though, being a monkey is awesome!" he says enthusiastically, slowing down to fall into step with me.

"Sure," I mutter. We return to silent walking.

“So, what’s your dream?” The Boy suddenly asks. My gaze darts back over to him, a question in my eyes. “Like, after you save your home and stuff,” he clarifies. “What do you wanna do?”

“My dream…” I murmur, pausing in my stride and steps faltering.

The Boy stops as well, turning to look back at me. His eyes are unguarded, open and curious. His entire face is open, his posture and stance conveying nothing but candid honesty.

I guess that’s what gets me, in the end. His stupid fucking eyes. Always his stupid, shiny, ***unrelentingly honest*** *eyes.*

I take a deep breath. “My dream is—”

Chapter End Notes

Yikes wonder what that was all about. Let's hear it for Ed growing a backbone I think?

Tickle torture, thematically, is very disturbing to me. Did the fact that I used to cry whenever my sisters tickled me as a kid impact me severely? Uh. Yeah, maybe. Shut up.

Also happy Canadian Thanksgiving! I am very thankful for all you little assholes and appreciate your support and kind words more than I could possibly say ♥

Reiterating: updates are moving to every other week. So no update next Sunday, but next next Sunday (i.e the 27th) and so on and so forth. You can always find the update schedule for the fic in the very end notes if there's any changes. I appreciate your patience and will kick you in the teeth while crying if you have a genuine complain about it ♥

Chapter 122: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Two: For You I Would Get Beat To Smithereens

Chapter Summary

Smithereens - twenty one pilots

Anyway all that shit leads up to now, and me waking up feeling like I jumped out of a 50 story building and hit my head off every single balcony on the way down.

Chapter Notes

Oooooh did the anticipation get you more excited oooooh????? Well here's 5k to tide you over for the next two weeks. Mwah ♥

Aachria stop using tøp songs for your titles for five goddamn minutes challenge difficulty level impossible. I literally cannot help myself. And what if I said there's still another one in here before we hit the timeskip.

Sweet Transvestite from the Rocky Horror Picture Show starts playing ominously in the distance

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a weird blurry period in my memory. I know for a fact I pass out; I couldn't say how long obviously, but I'm absolutely fucking OUT once Sadi is out of that room.

I remember odd flashes of the cell slash room slash thing; random bursts of lucidity marketed by swimming visuals of stone walls and shitty lights, bursts of hot pain impossible to cringe away from, and the ever present throb of a headache.

Here's a fun little fact: I don't actually like sleeping all that much. Laying in bed and being well rested and shit, yeah, but actual sleeping? I find it terribly boring and tedious. Maybe it's just remnants of the 'budget every second to maximize productivity' mindset hammered in by capitalism, maybe it's just me.

Either way, being asleep means you can't *think.* If you're unconscious, you're not doing shit.

It can't be healthy and can hardly be called good, but on a schedule as tight as the one I'm working with, that unoptimized time stings like salt in an open wound.

I had a point somewhere in there, I think.

Right, so being unconscious. That's uh, a thing I think I did a lot of in there? I really do get why sensory deprivation and not having windows around fucks people up so hard, not being able to tell how much time has passed is making my anxiety feel like gargling Pop Rocks.

Somewhere in the swamp of the unconscious/conscious confusion, weird shit happens.

I remember hearing something that wasn't my uneven breathing for a change, though I couldn't tell you what. I remember a light touch on my shoulder I'm not entirely certain was real, followed by a loud clunk I *am* sure was real.

I remember the song-like rush of *something* flooding my nervous system like a balm, a speck of energy returned to me enough to blink open my heavy eyes. I remember weird blobs of orange and flashes of white in front of me, then my legs being slowly stretched straight in a huge relief on my aching knees.

I remember someone rifling through my pockets — either putting shit in or taking it out, I have no idea — and a tug on my gun holsters. I remember trying to make protesting sounds and ending up nearly hacking my lungs up — I'm a little offended I can remember that shitty chunk instead of any of the important shit but whatever — and a soothing hand on my back I totally might have made up.

Then comes that blurry period; characterized only by the vague feeling of weightlessness, a nearly comforting dampened source of noise, weird moments of increased heat and chilling cold, then finally a return to normal temperatures unfortunately tempered by an increase of noise.

Around that point I go back to unconsciousness, hurrah.

Anyway all that shit leads up to now, and me waking up feeling like I jumped out of a 50 story building and hit my head off every single balcony on the way down.

I'm in something that vaguely reminds me of a theatre dressing room, or someone's absolutely dogshit shoebox studio apartment. It takes me beat, which I can forgive considering I have eight different concussions all fucking zealously on my brainstem, but I gather what exactly has happened fairly quickly.

I sit up on the couch/futon thingy I'm laid out on, very slowly because I don't fancy passing back out, and take stock of my person. I have all my shit with me, in contrast to when it was all… *repossessed* during my stint in captivity, including my guns and all the shit I had in my pockets.

Someone has clearly redressed all my injuries since my bandages aren't soaked in sweat anymore. My fingerless gloves are also gone, and I take a second to send a mental apology to Nami about them. Blessedly, whoever removed them had the good sense to keep my ring on my finger, or else whatever conversation is about to be had would have been significantly more… aggrieved.

I slowly shift around until my legs are over the edge of the couch/futon, silently thankful but incredibly off put by the fact my shoes are still on. The trip to my feet is gradual, sluggish to the point I get impatient with my own damn pace.

I mean, I still get that anemic headrush when I'm fully upright, so yaknow. Nothing matters.

My first few steps are taken at that same pace, and encompass all the grace of a baby giraffe so hopped up on tranquilizers it doesn't know up from down. I have to brace myself against the door and take a deep breath before opening it, and pause for a second deep breath before starting down the hall it opens into.

The hall is dim, barely lit at all, and I can hear what sounds like club music muffled from the other end. I make my way towards the noise steadily, one hand hovering near the wall in case

I need to catch myself.

The doors at the end of the hall are fucking huge and fucking heavy looking, I grimace and preemptively pray for my shoulder before nudging them open. I grimace harder as the club music gets louder, and shuffle through the door and let it shut behind me.

Right. So. Underground nightclub, I cannot be surprised because I knew exactly what I was walking into, but *wow.*

There's people of all stripes splayed around the giant hollowed out room: shape, size, gender, state of dress — this place has more variety than a box of Valentine's day chocolate. All of them are decked out in fishnet stockings and garters though, so there is a little continuity.

I slink around on the periphery of the party until I spot a big head of curly purple hair. That's where I beeline, expertly sliding around people and ducking under trays and swinging arms. I spot the familiar back of someone's head, and suddenly the person I'm gunning for switches.

The chair he's sat in is a large, near couch-sized loveseat with a curved and scalloped back. That's what I brace my hands on and vault over, swinging myself into the seat and swinging my arm over the shoulders of its occupant with a beaming smile.

"Heya Benny, it's been a minute!" I greet cheerfully, grinning harder as the man gapes at me.

"Little Detective?!" Bon shrieks incredulously, immediately pulling me into a tight hug that I return gratefully. "Gosh, you have no idea how worried I was about you! You need to do a frank evaluation of your recklessness, no joke!"

I laugh a little, patting him on the back. "No kidding. Would you believe I was actually trying to be better about that?"

Bon pulls back enough he can give me a doubtful look. "You're not doing a bang up job, sweetheart."

“Ahem,” another voice drawls. We both turn to the central occupant of the loveseat opposite us, and I have to blink twice at them before it really registers.

“Dr. Frank-N-Furter?” I blurt without thinking, momentarily bewildered because *why the shit is Tim Curry with an exceptionally large head here?* Then my mind catches up with my mouth and I shake my head. “Wrong icon. Pleasure to meet you, I’m E. D. Domino. Feel free to call me Ed,” I greet, reaching across the table spread with food to offer my hand.

“Charmed. Emporio Ivankov, at your service. Please, call me Iva,” the absolute *legend* responds with a laugh, taking my hand with a wink. I — god. The vaguely Eastern European accent, the eyelashes that could lift weights, the thick ass *immaculate* makeup… there’s just enough Katya in there it makes me nervous.

“Am I on any medications?” I ask without further preamble.

“Not at the moment, no. Inazuma was the one who collected you from your cell, and we decided it was best if your system remained clean incase something was used on you,” Iva explains, the pinkie of a fuchsia latex glove-covered hand poking the crown resting amongst purple curls back into place.

“Perfect,” I sigh, sagging in relief before pulling out the painkillers Dr. Kurotsuru gave me and throwing four back like they’re Pez. Overdose who? I’m in a lot of pain.

“Forgive the question, I don’t want to assume,” Iva starts, and I bring my focus back to the conversation. “Is it they/them?”

I nod. “That it is. And yourself?”

“Am I a man? Am I a woman?” those pose, crossing one leg over the other and keeping the toes of their heeled boots pointed. “It’s ambiguous at best, pumpkin. I’m fairly fluid, you use whatever feels right.” Fucken fair enough.

“The only thing straight around here is the way we’re all going to hell,” I say brightly, fistbumping Bon. “Uh — literally.”

“You can say that again!” Iva laughs. “Anywho, you sure do have some timing, Eddie-baby. I was just telling your darling friend about the Straw-boy.”

And just like that, my jubilant energy disappears like so much smoke. “He’s alive,” I say more than ask. Iva nods. “He’s ok?” I ask, voice significantly smaller.

“As of now, that depends entirely on him,” they say gravely.

“Can I have the slightly less melodramatic approach? I’d never ask you to *stop* the drama, but until these painkillers kick in I’m gonna need the toned-down version,” I plead, dropping my head into my hands and trying to relieve the pressure on my cranium.

Iva pouts. “There goes my fun. The simple version is that I’m using my hormone powers to cure Straw-boy of the poisoning he suffered from Magellan,” they explain. “The procedure has an incredibly low probability of success that entirely depends on Straw-boy’s will, and even then, it will take ten years off his lifespan.”

My heart clenches hard in my chest. Between this and Gear 2 taking years off his life, I wonder just how much time with him we’re losing.

Then again, what’s life worth if you’re not using it? How do you measure the effect of your life on the world against how long you spent living in it? How do you measure the price of existing? Of time spent doing what you want? Of *love?*

“Ace-boy will be transported out of Impel down in seven or eight hours,” they continue, and my eyes snap back to them. “Straw-boy, on the other hand, is gonna take around two more days to heal — if he survives that long. If he does, he will still need to sleep for three days to regain his energy.” The look Iva gives me isn’t pitying, and maybe that’s what gets me. “By the time he awakens, it will all be over.”

“Luffy will be awake on time,” I say simply.

I have nothing else to offer but unwavering faith. A loyalty you can’t call blind, not when I’m his eyes. Steadfast, unfailing devotion — nothing more and nothing less.

“Y — yeah!” Bon yells beside me, voice shaking just as much as his clenched fists are. “Straw-boy will be just fine, he has to be! T — two days of that… that screaming and pain, no problem! Straw-boy will be awake before we know it!”

Iva looks… I don’t want to call it skepticism, because it really isn’t, but it’s a healthy dose of pragmatism and a steely grounding in the reality of the situation. Iva knows we’re speaking about an impossible outcome to a situation so firmly set against optimism it’s laughable.

Then again, Luffy *has* always laughed in the face of the impossible.

“Even if we take the ‘if’ out of the matter, there remains the question of *when,”* they say, hand waving in a gesture I would call flippant if it wasn’t for the grin morphing their painted mouth. “Straw-boy waking up before your eight hours are up would be *far* beyond what you’d call a miracle.”

“It’s not a question of if *or* when,” I deny with a smile and a shake of my head. “It’s a question of how much food he’s gonna inhale when he does, and how much I can stomach before then.”

Iva barks out a laugh and gestures to the spread on the table between us. “Well, feel free to indulge!”

With clear and present permission, I dive for the food and start indiscriminately shoving things in my mouth. I mean full on serpent-unhinged-jaw levels of food carnage. I hear a vague ‘oh *wow’* in the midst of it that does wonders for my self esteem.

When the table is clear (and I would feel bad about that except I don't), I politely pat my mouth clean with a napkin and sigh contently. "Delicious, thank you very much."

"...Just fucking *wow,"* one of the onlooking residents of Newkama Land whispers.

I blink and glance around at the gathered crowd of people, all staring in fascination. "What?"

Bon places a solemn hand on my shoulder and shakes his head. "Little Detective, you are something else entirely."

I furrow my brow and tilt my head. "Thank you? I think?"

Iva seems to shake themself out of their own semi-shocked state with another laugh. "With that out of the way, I'd suggest you and Bon-boy get some rest while you wait for Straw-boy to wake up. I can show you where to find a quiet room," they offer.

Getting more sleep sounds tempting, *very tempting,* but…

"Nope!" me and Bon reply in sync, shaking our heads.

"We'll stay in Straw-boy's room!" Bon declares, jaw set like he's ready to start a whole second war if Iva denies us.

Iva, however, just dabs at the corners of their mouth with a handkerchief and sighs. "Well *I'm* certainly not going to be the one to stop you," they say lightly. "That rest will catch up to you whenever it so pleases, if you're running from it that's your prerogative."

Bon sniffs and gives them a tight nod, then turns to me with squinted eyes. "You're probably not gonna like this, little Detective."

———

Yeah I don't like it.

First off; I am still in A LOT of pain. Second; I am FUCKING TIRED. Third; I am just a little guy and having to listen to Luffy screaming in pain from behind a bigass chained up door is doing things to my chest that probably isn't conducive to a good recovery. Gotta get my ass on something for these heart palpitations.

And — look, I get it. I get what Bon's doing, and that it's probably honestly helping Luffy at least *a little,* but *fucking hell* my head is still stuck under thefloorboards of a rowdy tap-dancing class. So him hollering encouragements is very nice but it's also kind of making me wish for the sweet silent solitariness of my fucking cell.

Anyway.

"Quite the dedicated one, hmm?" Iva hums, standing beside me and making me feel terribly short. "I'd say it's impressive if I didn't begrudge encouraging it."

I make an answering sound high in my throat. "Well. My Captain's got that indomitable human spirit in him, and like attracts like. Also the insanity. That attracts people too."

Iva laughs and claps a hand onto my shoulder. "You'll fit in just about anywhere, Eddie-baby!"

There's a small stretch of time just spent listening to how loud the room has gotten now that most everyone who followed us in here is cheering along with Bon. And Luffy's screaming isn't *pleasant* by any means, but at least the screaming means he's alive.

With that thought securely in the back of my head, I turn to Iva and grab the hand they have on my shoulder with a tight nail-pinching grip. "Please, god, can you turn off my period I will give *anything* ***please—"***

Iva bursts out laughing again, drawing glances from the people cheering around us. “You want me to *turn it off?”* they repeat between cackles.

I nod emphatically. “I don’t even care if you remove my entire uterus somehow, I don’t. I never wanna have kids and honestly you taking the option away would give me nothing but peace of mind. I mean maybe leave enough I can still be a sex god but beyond that nothing is off limits—”

Iva cuts me off by waving their free hand and swiping a pinkie under their eyes, removing any tears before they can touch their makeup. “Eddie-baby, you are just too much!”

“Is that a no?” I ask dismally, the beautiful ray of hope that was lighting up my heart shrivelling up and dying. “But having a period on a boat is *so haaard.”*

“Of course it’s not a *no,* darling,” Iva chides. “I’d never deny something that would make you more comfortable in your skin, or that would make piracy on the high seas easier! If you’d like to skip right to being a man, I can do that,” they offer. “I can do the whole shebang right now, do you up all nice and handsome. *If* that’s something you’re interested in. If not, we’ll work out the finer points.”

Oh wow a one way ticket to a gender crisis, all aboard.

Would… damn bitch, would I *want* to be a man? Or at least have the body of one? I’m not gonna lie to myself, I’ve definitely thought about it once or twice or twenty times since I’ve connected the dots of being in the world, Iva being in this world, and what that could mean for me.

But like. Dude. *Dude.* Having the body of a guy. Imagine. Imagine how useful that would be when I’m trying to build muscle mass. Imagine how useful that testosterone would be. Imagine having a build like Zoro or Sanji’s. Bro I could have the Dorito waist to shoulder ratio. I could piss in the woods so *easily.*

But also. Having a dick sounds so goddamn inconvenient. Tight pants suddenly become a danger and I will forever be vulnerable to the Dick Kick. Plus I really don't need a homing beacon for when I'm horny because frankly with my libido that shit would get real repetitive *real* fast.

Anyway.

"No," I try, swirling the word around my mouth, "thank you. I think I'm alright keeping some of my equipment. You never know when these are gonna come in handy," I decide, gesturing to my chest with a lopsided smile.

Iva squeezes their hand solemnly on my shoulder, nodding sagely. "I understand completely. A good pair of tits can stop a war."

I have never felt so seen and understood by an individual in my life.

"You're so fucking cool," I sniff, wiping away imaginary tears. "Hey, you wanna join my pirate GSA?"

"Absolutely I do. What's that?" they respond, absolutely no fucking hesitation. This is why I love gay people, they're so goddamn ride or die so goddamn fast. Gay solidarity knows no bounds. Wait, is that a trauma response? Or do gay people just have some inherent predisposition to… fucken hell I dunno, just-add-water instant loyalty?

"Technically it stands for Gay Straight Alliance, but personally I'm partial to Gays Stealing All-these-bitches — one word, hyphenated, because the acronym doesn't need to be longer," I state. "Alternatively: Gays Against Government, GAG."

"Oh, I like that," Iva coos, patting my head like I'm a dog that just did a particularly interesting trick. "Best of both worlds; call it GSA but say it stands for GAG. Or GSA stands for GAG Saves Asses."

“Of course you’re fucking brilliant too,” I weep.

“Careful, Eddie-baby, you’re gonna give me a big head!” Iva cackles. We both pause and look at each other for a long moment. *“Bigger* head,” they concede.

“I didn’t say anything,” I say mildly, eyes shifting off to the side.

Iva levels a flat look at me. “You didn’t have to. Anywho, I can sort out and rearrange some hormones and turn your period off no problem, would you like to do that now or arrange a later date when we’re not all knee deep in shit?”

“Honestly just fucken hit me,” I invite, shrugging and gazing over at the big chained door between us and Luffy. Who is still screaming. Very loudly. “I’ve got a thing with needles so __”

Guess fucking what. Iva just straight up stabs me while I’m talking.

I start screaming, obviously. Because dude what the FUCK, fucking OW, Jesus CHRIST why do their finger needle things hurt SO *FUCKING* ***BAD???***

“DUDE WHAT THE FUCK?!” I shriek, staring gap-mouthed as their fucking needle fingers retract from my side with a nauseating *shck!* sound.

“All done!” they announce cheerfully. I make a strangled sound in the back of my throat. “I’ve found for people with a thing with needles it’s best to just surprise them. How do you feel?”

“LIKE I JUST GOT STABBED WITHOUT ANY WARNING,” I yell, doubling over and wrapping my arms around my stomach. “WHAT THE FUCK.” I could genuinely fucking feel the whatever-it-was enter my body. That was so fucking unpleasant. Any ideas I had about ever fully committing to man-body just died screaming. Literally.

“Don’t be so dramatic, you’ll be just fine,” Iva tuts, patting me on the head again.

“New rule of Pirate GSA,” I grit out, “no surprise stabbings. Absolutely fucking none. That’s rule #1.”

“Understandable, I will ask before I stab you next time,” Iva concedes, but they’re grinning in a way that does not put my mind at ease. “So again, how do you feel?”

I take a second to assess how I feel. There’s a lot of incredulity swimming around with the chemicals they pumped into me. And I mean… I’m feeling a little warm, I guess, but I’m in so much general agony I couldn’t really say if it’s done anything special to me. “I think I’m fine?”

“Then you’re probably fine!” Iva says enthusiastically. That seems like a bad metric for anyone doing anything medical adjacent to comply with.

I rub at my eyes with a huff. “Fucking hell I’m tired,” I mutter. “Is that hormone related or am I just feeling the past 24 hours?”

“You really should take that nap,” Iva advises. “Do you want to go back to the room you were in before?”

“Yaknow what? I’m just gonna have a lie down right here,” I mumble, shuffling over to the edge of the cave wall thing and sliding down so I’m sat against it. “I’ll be up in like… seven hours. Maybe less,” I announce through a yawn, crossing my arms and settling in before I’m conking right the fuck out.

_____

There’s a dull boom somewhere at the edge of the dream I’m having.

I feel my brow twitch and I sink further into my slouch. Dream Luffy is shouting about food while hitting the griddy, and that's all fine and dandy except something keeps kicking me in the leg.

Anyway.

_____

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEED!" a familiar voice screams in my ear. "WAKE UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!"

I jerk upright with my eyes wide the fuck open so goddamn fast I'm convinced I break the sound barrier. "'M AWAKE!" I shriek, absolutely not awake all the way.

"Good morning!" the voice says cheerfully, and then I have an armful of rubbery limbs. I blink, letting my eyes actually adjust and see whatever the fuck is going on around me, automatically wrapping my arms around the body.

"Oh holy *shit,"* I gasp, my brain finally catching up with my own body as I hug Luffy with everything I am. "Holy shit! When the fuck did you wake up?!"

His answer is muffled from where he's smooshed his face into my shoulder and I let out a breathless laugh as I hold him tighter. My brain is still moving at a snail's pace, so it takes another moment for me to register that Luffy is A) shirtless, and B) covered in blood.

"Good god, I can't leave you alone for a damn minute, can I?" I scoff, sinking my fingers into his grody ass hair.

Luffy shifts his face so his cheek is on my shoulder and laughs. "You know me!" I huff a responding laugh that makes my entire body shift. Luffy makes a little groaning noise and I

frown.

“You feel ok?” I ask, running my other hand down the planes of his back.

“I’m ok,” he answers, arms cinching tighter. “You’re good?”

“I’m good,” I confirm softly. *Now, anyway.* “You hungry?”

“I ate,” Luffy replies before shifting again and groaning louder. “I don’t feel so Fergalicious,” he moans.

“I’m gonna fucking *kill* Shanks,” I mutter under my breath. “Both him and Coin deserve a swift kick in the pants for inflicting this shit on me.”

“What’s Fergalicious?” Iva asks curiously, drawing my attention back to the room at large. There’s stray bones and plates scattered around the cave, the door Luffy was previously behind is blown wide open, and the crowd of Newkama citizens are all staring at us gap-mouthed and awe struck.

“Fergalicious definition makes the boys go loco,” I deadpan, then switch my attention back to Luffy. “On a scale of one to ten, how bad are you right now?” I ask, shifting him back to look him over.

Luffy gives me a half hearted but sunny smile and a shrug. “Uuuuuh… like a seven?” Right that’s too high and I don’t like that. Anything above a five for Luffy would KILL anyone else. Then Luffy’s eyes seem to catch on my face and the smile disappears off his. “Ed, what..?”

Oh. Right.

I shake my head, then grimace as it seems to set off the headache my meds (which probably wore off while I was sleeping, amazing) were keeping at bay. Luffy's mouth twists into a frown and I can see that old familiar guilt and responsibility swimming around behind his eyes.

I immediately smack him on the shoulder (gently), and point a menacing finger at him. "Hey. No, none of that. Remember what I said on Cocoyashi? What happens to me when you're not around *isn't your goddamn fault."*

Luffy scowls harder. "Doesn't make it *fine,"* he argues, finger reaching out and stopping just short of poking my cheek.

"I didn't say it was fine," I retort gently, reaching up and unfurling his hand, delicately guiding it onto my face. "Fucking look at youself, you think I'm not torn up about that?"

Luffy makes a disagreeing sound, thumb skirting across my bruised skin. "That's different—"

"No it's not!" I interrupt firmly. "We are who we are, we're always gonna be upset when we see each other hurt!"

"It *is* different!" Luffy argues. "You and Bon specifically said not to fight that guy, and I ran off without you because I was hungry, and I didn't even know anything happened to you and you look *awful—"*

"Luffy!" I cut in harshly, fighting off the urge to slap some sense into him. "Here's a life lesson I'm still trying to come to terms with; some shit is just out of our control! There's things that'll happen despite your best intentions, and the only thing we *can* do is try and change what we're able to and accept wherever that takes us!"

"If *this* is where that takes us, I don't want to accept that!" Luffy shoots back, palm pressing into my cheek. "Why can't I keep fighting until we *do* change everything?!"

“Because you look like you’re about to keel over!” I burst out, feeling something hot well up in the back of my throat. *“Goddamnit,* you aren’t invincible, Luffy! There’s absolutely nothing that has happened to me in the last 24 hours worse than what happened to you, and I am *exhausted.”*

“It isn’t about—” Luffy starts, but my hands snap onto his shoulders.

“You’re pushing yourself too damn far and it’s scaring me,” I confess, voice thick and tongue heavy. Luffy goes still. “I get it, I honestly do — you’re going past your limits because it’s the only thing you know how to do and it’s what’s necessary to beat whoever you’re fighting. But *fucking hell* Captain, just how many pieces of yourself are you gonna make me lose? How much of yourself will you sacrifice and make me watch?”

It’s hypocritical. I know it’s hypocritical. I’m no paragon of self-worth and I’m not some grand arbiter of sacrifice plays, the line of fire is my favourite dance floor and if I’m given the chance I will *always* take the risk for the people I care about.

But.

Luffy’s expression is fucking crushing, loose and tight all at once and with shiny seeking eyes that scream *don’t ask me to stop I can’t stop if you ask this is my nature I’m sorry this is hurting you—*

I know who he is. I knew who he was when I signed up for this. I knew from the second I saw him the deeper-than-bone protective instinct and the complete lack of a safety rail, knew it more intimately than there’s words for. I knew it then and that’s how I know it now.

“I won’t ask you to stop,” I promise hoarsely.

“Thank you,” Luffy responds, the sound of it raw.

“I need you to remember something,” I plead haltingly. Luffy nods slowly. “You have a duty and a responsibility to be there with me when the fighting is done. Any of the fighting — the fighting here and the fighting in the New World and — *the* fighting. You need to be there with me when we get our moment of peace.”

Luffy’s eyes search my face for a moment. “Yeah,” he concedes. “Yeah, I can do that. I can try to do that.”

“I’m your eyes,” I choke out, one of my hands trailing to his free one and squeezing it tight. “I’m your goddamned eyes. Eyes are nothing without the rest of the damn head. Be fucking *careful.”*

“I’m gonna be loud,” he claims nonsensically. I blink. “It’s gonna be really easy to follow. Every step of the way. If I’m ever being really stupid, you’re gonna be real close to knock some sense into me. You trust me to know where your line is? I trust you to know mine. Ok?”

“Ok,” I agree, smiling shakily and pressing a long kiss into the palm of the hand I’m clutching.

There’s a loud sniff and we both startle, heads snapping back to where we both totally fucking forgot the rest of the room was watching. Iva has a handkerchief over their nose with eyes pointed to the ceiling in an ‘I need to cry but my foundation was 48 dollars’ pose, everyone else in a near identical state.

“You are both so damn sweet,” Iva sniffs. “I’m gonna get cuteness aggression.”

Yeah. Ok. Fair.

I return my eyes to Luffy and he smiles. I really can’t help but smile back.

Chapter End Notes

RIP Ivankov's manga phonetic typing quirk, I decided writing out the words that start with W's with V's like it is in there was a fun little indicator of their accent, but I figure prioritizing the readability of their dialogue for my darling readers using translation services is more important. I did however come to that conclusion after the fact, so if any of the W words still have V's lmk lmao.

Ed and Luffy’s love language is just *makes impossible promise no normal person would be able to keep* *makes impossible promise no normal person would be able to keep* *makes impossible promise—* and that's just terribly sexy of them.

Chapter 123: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Three: Move Right Through Me On My Way To You

Chapter Summary

Paralyzer - Finger Eleven

“WOAH HEY NO WE TALKED ABOUT THIS!” I screech, swatting at Iva’s hands. “NO SURPRISE STABBINGS! WHAT THE FUCK!”

Chapter Notes

There is no escaping the divorced dad rock, it's with you forever.

The good news is I'm doing absolutely fantastic in my classes — you're looking at a bitch who gets 90s and 100s — the bad news is I am literally always tired, I haven't slept over 7 hours a night (excluding the 11 straight hours I slept on Monday and the 9 I got Tuesday) in months, I have to get a fucken cavity filled this week despite not missing a day of brushing my teeth in over 2 years, and on top of that I can feel the November/December seasonal depression closing in. But I'm also the most talented and sexy person alive so literally none of that shit can stop me from doing whatever the fuck I want.

Also I fixed that diecast model car I was talking about a while ago and I did it entirely through spite and moxie and sexy guesswork. I even embossed a teeny tiny license plate for it, I'm just that incredible. Anyway applause please I've completely lost feeling in one of my fingertips for this and it has yet to return (it probably will. Hopefully) but I've never felt more accomplished in my life. Thank you divorced dad, this is all your fault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What happened to Benny?” I ask, indicating where our friend is splayed out on the ground, dead-to-the-world unconscious.

“He was yelling encouragements at me for a reeeeally long time and then passed out,” Luffy answers, letting me help him shrug on the shirt Inazuma — who by the way has such an insanely cunty aura it’s almost unbelievable — passed over, while he returns his straw hat to its rightful place on his head.

“You’ve not regained your full strength yet,” Inazuma announces, swirling wine around the glass he has in hand. “You’ve only overcome the immediate danger, you need a few more days of rest before you can truly be called recovered.”

“No time for that, we’ve already wasted too much!” Luffy huffs. “Sorry, but could you guys watch after Bon for us? We’ll be back for him later! Ah…” he trails off as he wavers in place, listing sideways and nearly collapsing before I manage to catch him.

“I’ve gotcha, I’ve gotcha,” I mumble, slinging his arm over my shoulder and taking most of his weight, ignoring the moans of pain from my sore muscles and the gasps of shock from the crowd.

“The paper is still pointing down!” Luffy exclaims, leaning heavily into my side and staring into his palm at Ace’s vivre card — plucked from his hat during his tilt. “Ace is still below here… uh, where exactly… *is* here?”

“A vivre card, huh?” Iva mutters before shaking their head. “You’re currently between Levels 5 and 6. Since you’re on your feet, I doubt we will be able to stop you from going to your brother’s aid. Well… they’re your lives. You’ll do with them as you wish.”

“Hey Iva, are you gonna break outta Impel Down?” Luffy asks, tucking Ace’s vivre card back up into the ribbon of his hat. “Bon came all the way down here to bust your ass out, you know!” We both ignore the cry of outrage from the crowd about the ass comment. “Think you could tell us where they’ve got Ace while you’re at it?”

“Oh? Bon-boy came to save me?” Iva chuckles, mouth stretching wide. “He really is so sweet, isn’t he… Still, I’ll settle for the sentiment. The time isn’t right for me to break out yet.” They cross their arms over their chest and grin down at us. “I’m aware of the situation outside. Right now, with the Whitebeard Pirates and the Marines at the centre, the world is truly beginning to move! Even so, the big man’s still waiting things out. I’m of course referring to my comrade, the leader of all revolutionaries in the world!” Iva pauses for a moment as the gravitas builds. “The Revolutionary, Dragon!”

Me and Luffy both blink for a beat. “Oooh, you mean my dad,” Luffy ah’s. I fight down a snort with every ounce of self-restraint in me, forcing a straight face on despite every muscle I have trying to revolt.

“That’s right, when your dad makes a move with that army of his, then I’ll do some maneuvering of my own. Call it my grand comeback tour! If I were to escape right now, I’d just be exposing myself to recapture,” Iva explains flippantly before pausing. We get to actually witness Luffy’s words compute across their face, and it is *glorious*.

“YOUR ***WHAT?!”*** the entire room screams in unison. Iva genuinely just fucking launches themself across the room, slamming into the wall with a crack and shatter of stone.

I soak it in like it’s a salve, ignoring that it has basically the opposite effect on my head. God I missed shit like this.

“Y — Y — Y — YOU’RE *DRAGON’S SON?!* HE HAS A ***SON?!”*** Iva shrieks frantically, eyes popping out of their skull.

Luffy blinks slowly, once. “Oh right. I think that was supposed to be a secret.” I love him. I love him so fucking much I might just keel over dead. “Eh, whatever. Gramps was the one who told me anyway,” he says nonchalantly. “I don’t really know the guy. I’ve never even seen his face.”

“You definitely didn’t get your nose from him,” I snicker, pulling said nose and letting it snap back into his face. “At least we can thank god boot-tread face tattoos aren’t genetic.”

“You saw him? He’s got a face tattoo?” Luffy parrots, rubbing his nose with a pout.

I shrug. “You kinda had your schnoz in the dirt at the time, it’s not too surprising you didn’t catch a peek. I yelled ‘FUCK THE SYSTEM!’ at him before we got snatched by the typhoon, remember?”

"...Say, where are you from again..?" Iva chokes out, expression so stretched and pinched they're starting to look like Voldemort.

"East Blue," Luffy answers easily.

Iva goes through all five stages of grief, followed closely by a second run in a different order, before abruptly spinning on their heel. "Inazuma! Find out the departure time of Ace-boy's transport for me!" they bark, and Inazuma dutifully snaps to attention. "If the vivre card is still pointing down then he hasn't been moved yet! I'll be accompanying Straw-boy and Eddie-baby down to Level 6 immediately!"

Luffy perks right up. "You're gonna take us there?! Whoop! Thank you!" he cheers, bouncing in place and shaking me by the shoulders. "Let's go!" Iva still looks like they're caught in the denial stage, this time with their *own* actions, while Luffy crab walks us over to Bon and crouches at his side. "Bon, we'll be back for you later, ok?!" he says loudly, like speaking at a higher volume will make his unconscious body more likely to hear it.

I let Luffy take his own weight for a moment, digging around in my pockets until I find a scrap of paper and a pen I think is one of the ones I stole from Spandam's office way back when. I hear Iva come up behind us and start babbling about Luffy's goofy ass needing to keep secrets better and shouting instructions or whatever, but I'm more focused on flattening my palm to use as a writing surface.

Benny, don't do anything massively stupid. Don't even do something microscopically stupid. We're headed for Level 6, then back up to the exit. MEET US THERE, UNDERSTAND? I'm not tolerating another self-sacrifice leave-behind stunt this time, GOT IT? We're gonna need you for the next phase of this bullshit, so you gotta be there. I don't care if you've gotta leap off the top of the damn gulag to do it. Anyway hope your nap was good love you see you soon, Ed.

I sign off the note with six O's, six X's, and eight hearts, then fold it in half and stuff it partially under one of the stretches of bandages across his chest with a little self-satisfied smile.

"Alright!" Luffy hollers from my 6. "Just hang in there Ace! I'M COMING FOR YOU—!"

Of course, the goddamn second I took my hands off him — Luffy goes off kilter and drops unceremoniously to the floor. I skip like a damn record, turning and staring for a beat before I make a sound like a bleating goat and scramble to…

Well it's not catching him, because he's already on the floor, but I scramble to flit around him like an agitated hummingbird and that's pretty much equivalent in terms of concern. "Luffy?! *Ayo?!"* I squawk, patting his cheek and pawing at his chest to make sure his ass is still breathing.

Iva kneels down beside me and presses two fingers to his neck. "His pulse..!" they gasp sharply.

"HIS PULSE IS GONE?!" an onlooker screeches in alarm. My eyes dart up to them in confusion, since I can damn well still feel his heart pumping shit around in his chest cavity.

"...Is there!" Iva finishes regally. I level them with a very unimpressed look as the crowd caterwauls around us. They give me a cheeky grin and I roll my eyes.

Iva, the raging goddamn lunatic, takes the opportunity to stab Luffy. I just kinda watch blankly for a moment as their evil little needle fingers sink into his side, *through his fucking shirt might I add,* and start pumping shit into him before yanking them back out.

Luffy shrieks like… well, like he's been stabbed.

"WOAH HEY NO WE TALKED ABOUT THIS!" I screech, swatting at Iva's hands. "NO SURPRISE STABBINGS! WHAT THE FUCK!"

"That was for GSA members!" Iva says in protest, triumphant like they needed to find a fucking loophole.

“DUDE!” I holler, grasping at my hair. “OF COURSE HE’S PART OF THE GSA! YOU THINK I’D MAKE A GSA AND *NOT* HAVE MY HUSBAND JOIN?! HE DOESN’T GET A CHOICE!”

“You should really consider a badge or a membership card,” Iva grumbles, crossing their arms petulantly. “I mean honestly, how am I supposed to know who I can and cannot stab?”

I hold back a biting remark about how you really shouldn’t stab *anyone* unprovoked unless you want to be considered an *asshole* as Iva blinks once, then twice, then launches themself across the room as it explodes in shock once again. “Oh come on, that can’t honestly have shocked you!” I protest, squeezing Luffy’s shoulder while he starts writhing around and groaning. “We have rings! Fucking look at us!”

“I have learned entirely too much in the past ten minutes!” Iva moans, burying their face in their hands. “No more can be expected of me! I’ve reached my limit!” They pause dramatically for a second before striking a pose and winking. “Or have I? Anyway, that was an adrenaline shot, he’ll be immune to fatigue for the next day. As for the after-effects that will manifest after the fact… bah, that’s not important right now!”

I strangle a scream in my throat, hands raised and twitching like I could just reach out and wring their damn neck. “I am going to like you so much more when I’m not wading through brain trauma and having all your… personality directed straight at me,” I garble out.

Luffy twitches hard once, then twice. “You should probably take a step back,” Inazuma advises. “He’s about to be… *very* energetic.”

Oh… oh no.

———

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH! FOR SOME REASON I’M SUPER FULL OF ENERGY RIGHT NOW!” Luffy screams, tearing through the snowy forest with reckless abandon.

“WELL I’M NOT! SLOW THE FUCK DOWN!” I bellow, sprinting after him. I am NOT loving the sheer amount of snow I’m kicking directly into my own face by accident. Or the snow *Luffy* is kicking into my face. I’m not loving the snow in general.

“There’s not a minute to waste, it’s for the best he doesn’t!” Inazuma calls from my right, somehow managing not to spill a single fucking drop of his wine while he runs.

“If we don’t worry about keeping hidden, we don’t have far to go! You hold in there honey, it’s time to run for all you’re worth!” Iva cackles, except they’re fucking TALL and the snow isn’t bogging them down AT ALL so I’m not taking that shit from them.

So yeah. We’re just making a mad dash through the stupid cold-ass shithole that is Canada but Worse with a mob of gays following us, beating up wolves and nearly tripping to death in the thick blanket of snow covering the ground.

Yeah ok that last part is mostly (no, it *is)* just me. Sue me, I’ve had a rough day. Week. Month. It’s been a rough *life.*

“Inazuma! The key!” Iva barks as we reach the huge frozen doors that lead out of this shitty level, the two of them pulling slightly ahead of us.

“Indeed,” Inazuma responds, unlocking the door and letting it swing open so we can rush through without losing pace. “They are guards beyond this point!” he informs.

“Bring ‘em on!” Luffy hollers, and then we’re sprinting down a much more temperate hallway.

“I hate the cold!” I whine, trying to rub feeling back into my arms through Coin’s borrowed (and absolutely destroyed, sorry fam you’re not getting this thing back in one piece) shirt. I also catch the eye of a visual Transponder Snail up on the wall and give it a viscous grin and cheeky wink.

“Gotta make it, gotta make it, gotta make it!” Luffy chants in time with the rhythmic slap of his sandals on the stone masonry of the floor.

Speaking of the floor: it’s got spikes. So do the walls, and the ceilings, and the stairs when we finally reach those. I mean it doesn’t amount to much because we’re fucking crazy and it’s kinda hard for a bunch of dinky spikes to stop a stampedeing horde of homosexuals, but I can appreciate the gesture for what it is.

Oh there’s also guards. Yeah we kick a lot of their asses. I think I punched out some guy’s entire front panel of teeth. Poor fuck, hope this place has good dental insurance.

“Move it, move it, move it!” Luffy yells, kicking a poor fuck in the face. “Outta my way!”

“Fuckin’ scooch, narc!” I shriek, tripping another into the crowd of queers ready to rip the sucker to shreds behind me. *“Fuuuuuuck!* My shoulder is killing me!” I moan, trying to roll it out as we stumble out into the halls of Level 6.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAACE! WHERE ARE YOOOOOOOU!” Luffy shouts, skidding across the bricks. “I’M HERE TO SAVE YOOOOOOOU!”

“UP AND AT ‘EM, PORTGAS! I’VE GOT EVERY SINGLE GRADE OF CONCUSSION AND A BONE TO PICK!” I add, nearly slamming into Luffy’s back as we take a second to assess where to go next.

Iva has yoinked a guard and is pointing him around hoisted like a misbehaving cat. “Alright bucko, which cage is it?! And don’t even think of getting smart with me!” they demand, shaking him about.

“O — Ok! Please stop shaking me!” the guy cries, pointing one shaky hand down the hall while the other frantically tries to stem the bleeding from his clearly broken nose. “It’s d — down that way! T — Third in from the big cell!”

We start sprinting again.

C'mon, please please please, please god PLEASE for once let something work out and he's not gone yet, YOU FUCKING OWE ME ***C'MON!***

We come to a huffing and puffing stop in front of the indicated cell, staring in at the bloodstained stone and cuffs, and it's *single fucking occupant.*

"No…" I pant, fingers twisting into the fabric of my shirt. "God*damnit..!"*

"He's…" Luffy chokes out between breaths. "He's not here!"

"You're absolutely sure this is the right cage?!" Iva shrieks, shaking the guard even harder than before. "I said no funny shit!"

"N —No funny shit! I'm completely certain this is it!" the guard whines, looking damn close to tears.

"We must have been just a little too late..!" Inazuma grunts.

My fingers go to my hair and yank. "GODDAMNIT!" I scream, my entire fucking body shaking in frustration. I snatch the guard's hat right off his head, heedless of his terrified whimper, and whip it as hard as I can at the ground. "SON OF A COCK-JUGGLING THUNDER CUNT — SHIT, FUCK, *FUCK, DAMNIT,* ***SHIT!"***

There's an awkward cough from the cell. "Uh. You're Strawhat Luffy and the Detective of the Damned, right?!" a deep and rough voice follows it, gaining urgency and volume through the sentence.

“...Er, yeah?!” Luffy responds, face scrunching up.

“They’ve only just departed! Go after them! Ace was taken through the lift!” the voice continues.

Luffy blinks twice. “...Uh, old guy, who’re..?”

“If you hurry you can still make it!” he shouts, chains rattling as he shifts forward into the light filtering through the bars. “NOW *MOVE!”*

“OK! THANKS! STILL DON’T KNOW WHO YOU ARE THOUGH!” Luffy yells, spinning on his heel.

“That must be it! Let’s go!” Inazuma calls, pointing to the large open bay door just across the way. “The lift cabling is exposed!”

“THANKS JIMBEI, YOU’RE MY HERO! A KING AMONGST MEN!” I holler, following after my Captain.

“That’s the Jimbei guy you’re always talking about?” Luffy questions as we pause and peek over the edge of the bay down into the… elevator shaft… “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly, schooling my features.

“Shaft joke?” he prompts.

“Yeah it was a shaft joke,” I confirm.

“Haha. Nice,” he snickers.

The love of my life, ladies and gentlemen. The love of my FUCKING life.

“The operational circuits are locked! It’s no use!” Iva shouts from the pulley something or other that controls the elevator.

“SON OF A BITCH!” Luffy howls to the ceiling in righteous indignation. Have I… been a bad influence on him? He sticks his head into the shaft and twists his neck so he’s looking up. “Ed, can you get us up — WHAT THE FU—”

I yank Luffy back by the collar as a giant fucking spike ball slams down into the elevator shaft and nearly crushes him into paste.

“DAMMIT THIS PLACE IS SO UN-OHSA COMPLIANT I FEEL LIKE I’M IN A CO-OP TRAINING SKIT!” I yowl, shaking Luffy with one hand and shaking the other in a fist at the ceiling.

“Of course they wouldn’t let us up that easily!” Iva grumbles, waving away debris as it plumes out of the bay door. “The lift seems to be out of the question, they beat us to it!”

“We’ll just have to go up the way we came!” Luffy announces as we all spin back to the stairs we entered from.

Yeah SIKE we would do that if a bigass gate thingy hadn’t slammed down around the staircase, effectively blocking us in.

“This place sucks so. Fucking. Much,” I groan, tugging on my hair to punctuate the words. “Also everyone take a huge step back, they’re about to gas us.”

“They’re what—” Iva starts, but gets cut off by Luffy and I shrieking as gas starts billowing down the stairs and spilling out into the halls.

“Poison?” Inazuma asks, taking a half step back.

“Who cares what it is?! I don’t give a fuck!” Luffy hollers, running headlong into the cloud. I snatch his wrist before he takes off, which makes reeling him back in by the stretched-out limb when he promptly falls to the ground snoring much easier.

“Sleeping gas,” Inazuma corrects himself flatly

“Could you be just a little less reckless?!” Iva berates in a screech.

“So they mean to put us and this entire floor to sleep to wash their hands of us,” Inazuma infers.

“But this is the only exit we have left!” Iva grits out.

“Damn you guys! Don’t get us caught up in your shit!” one of the prisoners shrieks from behind the bars of a cage.

“Do something!” another wails. “At this rate the whole floor will be flooded with gas!”

“You people suck!” yet another adds.

“Stop shouting at me! I will fucking Cask of Amontillado your ass!” I yowl, turning the full force of my glare on the last guy. And with the sheer breadth of anger and frustration coursing through my body, him just shrinking back with a whimper seems a pretty tame reaction to whatever my face is doing.

Inazuma suddenly bursts into action beside us, hands morphing into bigass scissor blades as he sprints towards the bars, running the blades along the floor. It’s low-key super hard to

follow which is probably just a me thing, but he somehow manages to enclose the staircase in strips of the stonework ground.

"Wow," one of the prisoners awes. "What the *fuck?"*

"Inazuma ate the Snip-Snip Fruit, making him a Scissorman," Iva explains. "He can manipulate the things he's cut like they're paper!"

"Hey! Crab guy! I need to go up there!" Luffy protests, blearily swiping at his eyes.

"There was no other method of stopping the gas," Inazuma counters calmly. "We can hardly escape if we're all unconscious on the ground."

"If that's what we gotta do, then that's what we gotta do! I'm not letting them kill Ace!" Luffy hisses between his teeth, clenching his fists.

I grab him by the shoulder and twist him to face me. "Luffy, no one is saying that," I say sternly.

"I'm saying the enemy's strategy was simple but effective," Inazuma states straightforwardly. "There is no means of escape from this level."

There's a beat of silence before Iva holds up the handful of unconscious Visual Transponders they collected… I genuinely don't know when. I did not see them move. "This is all we can do, rob them of their means of monitoring us," they mutter glumly. "Logistically speaking, this operation is kaput. There's no way we can make it in time. Ace-boy was taken straight up the lift, and their military escort will be swift. Take a peek at the vivre card, I bet it's not even pointing directly up any more."

Indeed, when Luffy frantically tugs it free from his hat, the smoldering scrap of paper is tilted on a harsh and damning angle.

“By now he’s most likely been handed off to the Marines,” Iva continues solemnly. “Out of respect for your feelings, I will assist you both in escaping in whatever way I can. But Ace-boy is on his way to Marineford, you should give up… no, leave it to Whitebeard.”

Luffy’s eyes meet mine and I nod. “If Ace is at Marineford, then that’s where we’re going!” he proclaims without a moment of hesitation.

“Phase one is a bust, so what?” I huff with a laugh. “No plan survives first contact with the enemy, that’s why I planned *three!”*

“W — What?!” Iva chokes out in a shriek. “Are you CRAZY?! The greatest battle the world has ever seen is about to take place on that island! I don’t care how many phases you planned, do you have any idea how powerful every single player on that field is?!”

“If I gave up I’d regret it forever!” Luffy shouts. “I’m *going!”*

“The people on Marineford are just *people,”* I shrug. “I’d like to see any one of them try to stop this force of fuckin’ nature.”

Iva reels back for a moment, blinking rapidly at my Captain and sending me sidelong glances. “Resolution is one thing,” Inazuma says slowly, “but none of us are going anywhere while we’re trapped on this floor.”

“If you want to get out of here, I could certainly help,” a deep and gravelly and undeniably familiar voice drawls from the cell behind us. “I could open up a great big hole right in the ceiling. How about it, Strawhat? Kuhahaha!”

I pause for a moment. “Oh right,” I ah, then turn to the cage with a grin. “Hey Crocodile! I came to pick you up for the GSA meeting!” I greet cheerfully.

“WHAT EVEN *IS* THAT?!” Crocodile yells, jerking forward and nearly bashing his forehead into the bars.

Luffy whips around fast as lightning. *“YOU?!”* he shrieks in consternation. I pat his shoulder twice and he huffily settles back onto his heels, arms crossed and still glaring at the former Warlord.

Crocodile recomposes himself and sticks his nose in the air. “Well well well, if it isn’t Strawhat’s pet Detective,” he sneers.

“The very one! Fancy seeing you here!” I reply brightly, considering the lattice separating us. “Damn, this is some interesting role reversal.”

“No comeback for the pet comment?” Inazuma asks, head tilted.

“I have no defense for that, I’m like barely three steps above an attack dog,” I concede with a shrug.

“It’s good you’re aware of that,” Crocodile jeers sharply. He seems so much more… *diminished* without his fur coat, clad in striped prison fatigues and his wrists in shackles. Speaking of…

“Fucking crazy they let you keep the hook, I know damn well that part is removable,” I comment, giving the thing a disparaging look.

“Cut the shit, Detective Domino,” Crocodile growls before schooling his features in an easy, if sharp, smile. “Point is, I’ve given no heed to emerging into the outside world thus far. But now I’m hearing Whitebeard is going to war with the Marines..? Never thought I’d get the chance to take the old man’s head… Kuhahaha! I have a vested interest! With my powers an escape would be simple *and* mutually beneficial, don’t you agree?” he proposes, the landscape of his face shifting around his scar.

“Don’t fuck with me! You’re the bastard who tore up Vivi’s country!” Luffy shouts, once again jerking forwards towards the chained asshole and his depressing little habitat.

“That’s all behind me, I have no interest in that country anymore,” Crocodile scoffs, sounding bored. “Learn to let go of the past, Strawhat.”

“Rich coming from the guy begging to be let out of prison to settle a one-sided grudge with the most dad-coded guy on the sea,” I mumble under my breath.

“What was that?” he asks sharply.

“Nothing!” I sing lightly. “And wasn’t that, like, a matter of months ago? Like two? *Maybe less?”*

“Exactly, move on. I’m a different person now,” he deadpans.

Luffy makes aggrieved sounds under his breath, pacing out an angry little circle in front of the cell. I roll my eyes heavenward.

*Lord fucking help us, this is gonna be a **long** jailbreak.*

Chapter End Notes

Wow I missed Crocodile didn't expect that one. He's such a perfect mix of nonchalant schemer and malevolent jackass, the chillest guy you know right up until you're funnier than him. Imagine not having a speaking role in the fic for 87 goddamn chapters and your comeback line is something as lame as "If you want to get out of here, I could certainly help." Imagine being that uncool. Literally could not be me.

BUT WHO GIVES A FUCK ABOUT THE RAT MAN GUYS JIMBEI IS ACTUALLY THERE NEXT CHAPTER OH MY GOD!!! HOLD ONTO YOUR HATS THE MOST

ELIGIBLE BACHELOR IN ONE PIECE IS COMING!!! HIDE YOUR HUSBANDS AND WIVES!!! GIRD YOUR LOINS!!!

Anyway see you in two weeks love you bye ♥

Chapter 124: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Four: Pull Your Hair Back Tight, Head Right For The Extraction Point

Chapter Summary

Extraction Point - The Mountain Goats

"The allegations are unbeatable," I wheeze into my hands, dropping my forehead onto Luffy's shoulder as my own start shaking with cackles.

Chapter Notes

Big fan of this whole album, The Mountain Goats never miss. Is next chapter also a song off this album? Maybe. Fuck off. Or guess which, who gives a damn.

New tøp song *and* new Father John Misty album dropped on Friday and both are certified BANGERS, good fucking day for the music industry at large.

This fic thrives off finding a character to bully relentlessly and that dubious honour currently goes to good ol' Crocodile.

Fuuuuuuuuck man I have so much shit to do, these last like three (I think..?) weeks of my semester are gonna SUCK but my hot ass can DO THIS RAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!! Praying for all the other students out there guys we GOT THIS SHIT WE CAN DO IT!!!!! THE POWER OF SEXY WILL COMPEL US!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Let's free him, Strawboy," Iva suddenly suggests from behind us. "This man would certainly be of use to us, especially if you're serious about *storming Marineford."*

"Whaaaaaaaa?!" Luffy shrieks. "But *Iva!* This *fucken guy—"*

"Ivankov…" Crocodile all but snarls, voice coming out as a low rumble.

“It’s been a while… Croco-boy…” Iva drawls with an unnerving grin.

“You guys know each other?!” Luffy asks, still looking pissed but now confused on top of that.

“We did, a lifetime ago,” Iva says breezily, and I don’t put much effort into holding back a snort. “That was back when he was still an up-and-coming rookie.” They tilt their head slyly and put all their teeth on display. “Don’t you worry, even if he were to attempt to betray us, I’ve got a handle on it. He’s not a man to be trusted by any means, but…” they let out a maniacal laugh that has Crocodile gritting his teeth and a vein ticking in his forehead, “I know a special little secret of his! *Although* if he agrees to be on his *best* behaviour, I would be willing to keep it to myself, hee-haw!”

“Why you..!” Crocodile hisses with a glare that could curdle milk.

“The allegations are unbeatable,” I wheeze into my hands, dropping my forehead onto Luffy’s shoulder as my own start shaking with cackles.

“Shut your whore mouth!” Crocodile snaps hotly, and that honest to god just makes me laugh harder. I’d feel worse about poking this, except he tried to start a civil war in my friend’s country and also he’s a shit. So.

“Hey! If you’re freeing people, let me out!” someone screeches from another cell.

“Yeah, I’ve got a bone to pick with Whitebeard too!” someone else adds.

“Silence!” Iva demands shrilly, winking at them with such force it makes actual fucking force. Like puts-them-on-their-asses force. Fucken *A*.

“I beg of you all!” a sudden shout startles the air. We all turn around back to the cell Ace should have been in. “Take me with you as well! I swear I’ll be of use!” Jimbei implores, panting and straining against the frankly ridiculous amount of chains holding him.

“Hell yeah, dude,” I agree.

“I know Ace, I’ve known him since he joined the Whitebeard Pirates!” Jimbei continues like that didn’t register. “He’s told me all about his younger brother, and spoke very highly of Detective Domino while we shared this cell!” Aw. That’s so sweet of him.

“Sure thing, man,” Luffy agrees.

“I was locked up for objecting to this war, and I want to save Ace as well! So please, let me die a glorious death!” Jimbei finishes his plea, then pauses for a long second before his eyes seem to pop out from under his curly blond eyebrows. “Wait, you’re agreeing just like that?!”

“Seconded, just like that?!” Inazuma adds, looking put-off by our flash decision.

“Of course,” I say matter-of-factly. “You wanna save Ace, that’s good enough for me. Plus I’m a huge fan, I’m having a *moment* over here.”

“Ed thinks you’re super awesome,” Luffy confirms. “That’s all I need!”

Jimbei blinks at us twice, then dips his head and squeezes his eyes shut. “...Then I am in your debt!” he promises.

“I’d be in your debt too! Let me out!” one of the prisoners demands.

“Take me with you!” another wails.

“Silence!” Iva shrieks again, once again winking the fucks into oblivion.

I point to the Fishman in the cage. “You’re getting out no questions asked. *You* however, I’ve got a couple conditions for,” I announce imperiously, jerking my head at Crocodile. The group blinks at me. “The first one, obviously, is you’ve gotta join my pirate GSA. Non-negotiable.” I ignore Crocodile’s outraged squawk and speak over him loudly. “The second: save trying to assault a senior citizen until *after* we get Ace.”

“Why the genuine *fuck* would I agree to that—” Crocodile starts to protest before Iva makes a loud humming noise.

“What was that? You have a complaint?” they drawl cheekily. Crocodile sneers at them while Inazuma shoves his wine glass into Luffy’s hands, turns his pointer finger and thumb into tiny scissor blades, and starts working on the lock to Jimbei’s cell. Luffy curiously sniffs at the glass and recoils with a sour expression.

“Dude, it’s like this,” I start, gesturing vaguely in the air. “Ace is the highest priority, and Whitebeard is the best asset there is to get him back. So having your annoying ass jumping at him and distracting him is — say it with me — *detrimental to the plan.”*

Crocodile mutters something very unflattering under his breath and Iva politely coughs into their hand. He immediately shuts up and good *god* I gotta get some blackmail on this guy — it’s like Zoro with the debt, it just fucking *works*.

“I’ve got no problem with you being a nuisance to any other people there,” I grant. “Fuck it, you could go fight every single motherfucker on that battlefield, I don’t even give a shit. Throw hands with all of them. Walk out there pussy first — metaphorically speaking — and just go at it. Catch smoke indiscriminately. Catch strays with everyone. Who gives a shit.”

“I won’t let you lay hands on old man Whitebeard, Crocodile,” Jimbei grumbles, ducking through the small door of his cell with his chains removed. “You try anything, you’ll have *me* to worry about.”

Crocodile glowers at him for a long moment before his gaze ticks back to me. It crumbles into this twitching expression of pure dissension and depression and I am HIGH on the glory of it. “I should have stabbed you in that cage under Rain Diners when I had the chance,” he mutters hatefully.

“But then I wouldn’t be here now to break you out of prison!” I say sweetly, the literal pure embodiment of an angel.

Crocodile makes a sound somewhere between a groan and a strangled cat, and Inazuma makes his way to his cell with his scissor fingers poised at the lock, looking at us for confirmation.

“So? Are we agreed?” I prompt slowly, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Crocodile makes the noise again — it’s pretty impressive he could recreate it honestly — and after a moment of intense internal conflict, nods. “Fine. We’re in agreement,” he grits out reluctantly.

I give Inazuma a big grin and a thumbs up and he starts on the lock. “Good choice! This’ll be fun, promise. Plus I’m doing you the solid of granting you membership into the coolest club on the Grand Line, pirate GSA is a huge upgrade from your lame Seven Warlords fraternity.”

Crocodile opens his mouth, probably to make another snarky comment, when from down the way a low laugh echoes. “Murunhuhuhu!” We all freeze as there’s a woman’s voice that follows it. “Am I invited to your little pirate GSA?” she croaks, a smirk evident in her voice.

I exchange a glance with the rest of my cohort, then slowly take a few steps so I can see into the cell the voice came from.

Inside it sits a giant of a woman — not an actual giant, but fucking *tall* none the less — with purple pigtails framing a strong chin and a witch-like nose, both her eyes and painted lips curled up in something like mischeif. She’s in the striped uniform like everyone else (though her shirt is altered into a v-neck) and seems completely relaxed from her place amongst her cellmates, who have all crammed themselves into the corners to get as far away from her as possible.

I pause for a second, squinting at her. “…Wait, aren’t you that scary murder lesbian?” I blurt.

The woman laughs again, and yeah that's totally Catarina Devon. Like the one that joins Blackbeard's crew after he breaks her out. Hm. Yeah I'm not sure how to feel about this one.

"Say no," Iva hisses quietly in my ear. I blink. Oh right, she asked to join the GSA.

My initial reaction is a firm and resounding *fuck* no, but I take a second to actually think about it. That… on a real fundamental level that would be goddamn hilarious. Like. Like think about it.

When given the choice between the sensible option and the one that's fucking funny, we all know which way I swing every single time.

"Yeah you're absolutely invited to my pirate GSA," I agree with the bare minimum amount of thinking. "I dunno if you're gonna be able to join the monthly book club call down here, what with the distinct lack of Transponder." I pause for a moment. "And books."

"EXCUSE ME?!" Iva yelps.

"Wait *monthly book club?!"* Crocodile squawks in outrage.

"Do I have to do the book club?" Luffy asks a little apprehensively.

"No, you can skip the book club because I love you," I cede.

"I could join the calls from outside my cell," Catarina says slyly, leaning forward with a crooked grin.

Hm yeah hell no.

“Ok respectfully I am not doing that because you scare the honest to god shit outta me and I don’t know if I can morally and in good conscience be responsible for the scourge you’d wreck on the female population,” I deny flatly.

The pirate scowls, but shrugs like she can’t really argue with that one. “Yeah fair enough,” she grumbles.

“Rule #1 of Pirate GSA is no surprise stabbings, by the way,” I mention. “We decided that a few hours ago. *Someone* is a little *quick on the fucking draw,”* I hiss, pointedly narrowing my eyes at Iva.

Iva just exasperatedly huffs and rolls their eyes, arms crossing and lips pursing. “You really should have been more clear about the rule from the get-go,” they say petulantly.

I’m surrounded by little shits.

“We are wasting valuable time just sitting around and talking!” they proclaim, resettling their hands onto their hips. “It’s time to stop dragging our heels and get a move on!”

“WHOOOOP!” Luffy immediately shouts, pumping his arms up and down. “LET’S GOOOOOO!”

“I’m not joining a book club,” Crocodile states with way too much self importance for a man in prison fatigues looking like he hasn’t showered in months. He’s stepping out of his cell and rubbing his freed wrist with a smug smirk, too. Dickhead.

“I’m not your parole officer,” I shoot back. “I’m just the asshole whose club you agreed to join, *book club included.* You wanna go back in the cage? Huh? Is that it, sandy boy?”

“You think you could manage it?” Crocodile taunts, leaning down into my face with a challenging sneer.

“You wanna find out pisswizard—” I start before Luffy is grabbing onto my shoulders and bodily turning me towards him with an expectant look.

“Up, now!” he says insistently.

“Alright, ok!” I relent. “Get us up, sandman! Is the plan to just make a hole and Superman us up like a taxi, or..?”

“If he can make a hole in the ceiling, I can handle getting us up it,” Inazuma announces, jerking his chin towards the stone-strip encased staircase we came from.

“And don’t try anything untoward,” Jimbei adds in a low rumble, stepping up behind me and Luffy to give Crocodile a stern frown.

I turn to look at him and I damn well know stars are popping out of my eyes because *FUCK* this guy is so fucking great. I stick my hand out like a fucking buffoon and I know my smile has gotta be *so* fucking unnerving. “Hi. Wow. It’s so cool to finally meet you,” I rush out, literally vibrating in excitement. “It’s an honour, holy SHIT.”

Jimbei blinks twice down at me — also I have never felt smaller than in a room with this fucking group of people — then chuckles semi-akwardly and reaches down to grab my hand in his own and give it a firm shake. “No, the honour is all mine, Detective Domino.”

The strangled squeal that manages eek out despite my best efforts is also probably so fucking unnerving. I feel bad for him.

“Dear god,” Crocodile mutters behind me. When I turn to look, still holding Jimbei’s hand might I add my ass has just not let go, he’s staring with a repulsed expression and a hand raised to the hole opening in the ceiling above us as sand eats away at the stone.

I (mercifully) drop Jimbei's hand to give the wannabe mob boss two middle fingers. Inazuma is preparing one of those same stone strips with his scissor arms beside us, and Iva is just shaking their head and sighing exasperatedly.

"Let's go save Ace!" Luffy hollers, and I swear to god I can feel that anime-ass pumped-up fire-aura radiating off him in waves. Or maybe that's Haki. Who fucking knows.

Inazuma finishes putting up the tall spiral staircase-esque strip of stone up into the furthering tunnel out of Level 6, and motions us all forward. "Let's make haste for the exit, then."

I take a second to glance around the cells surrounding us. Is it worth it to try and like… murder Blackbeard's would-be crew..? Or even trying to bring them with us..?

"We've got two former Warlords, two high ranking Revolutionaries, and two idiots with enough motivation to jumpstart a partial governmental collapse, I think we've got this," I mutter mostly to myself. Iva snorts loudly.

Whatever. It feels kinda… icky, to do that. I'm not examining those feelings any closer than I have to.

"We're making a pit stop on the way," Crocodile demands, heading up first without regard for the rest of us and the sand he's blowing into our eyes by flying. Dickhole. "I'm not running around in *this,* and I want my coat."

"Oh my god fucking *contraband room—"*

We all follow right behind him.

———

“How does a man whose powers are literally to be made out of dry ass moisture killing sand stay so fucking greasy all the time. Genuinely what the fuck is your secret,” I ask Crocodile as we — we being me, Luffy, Crocodile and Jimbei because the other two stopped to have some kinda motivational meeting with the other Revs that were waiting in Canada but Worse — gun up the Cook Your Darlings in the Boiling Pot of Doom stairs.

“I don’t know how I could have possibly forgot how fucking annoying you are down to a molecular level, but I would give anything to go back to that ignorant bliss,” he grits out, staunchly keeping his head turned forward to retain some semblance of composure.

“Now you’re just being mean,” I pout. “We stopped at the contraband room for you, the least you could do is be *nice.”*

By the way, the contraband room was just… I don’t even know. Unclaimed baggage room at an airport. This hellhole is *lucky* we’re in a fucking rush or I would have stolen *so much shit.*

“Yeah, don’t be mean to Ed!” Luffy huffs, annoyed. “I already hate having you around, don’t make it worse!”

Crocodile makes a noise with energy remarkably similar to Zoro’s squawking, if not with similar sounds.

“It’s coming up on 10 AM now, the execution is at 3 PM *sharp!”* Jimbei announces, side-eyeing us with something inscrutable as we run. “They’ll be sure to try and take Ace’s life at the exact time if possible! If old man Whitebeard is going to intervene, he’s sure to make his move hours beforehand! Ace is out on the open sea… the battle could break out anytime!”

“But they won’t execute him before 3, right?! That’s what matters — we still have time to do something!” Luffy yells, somehow managing to run up the stairs even faster than before. Fucken *balls* I’m tired.

Crocodile scoffs a condescending sound that has every one of us shooting him sharp looks. He ignores them and flies up the last of the steps to skid to a stop in front of the huge door separating us from the floor — and most likely a platoon of guards. “Doors mean nothing,”

he drawls, slowly and dramatically raising his flesh hand. “This right hand of mine will turn them to dust…”

Yeah that’s taking entirely too long. “No time for your theatre kid bullshit right now!” I declare, slamming my palms into the door beside him while he’s still gathering sand up through the wood and stone and twisting them sharply to the side.

The door immediately bursts outward right off the hinges with surprising amounts of force, conveniently flattening half the frontline of pitchfork and rifle wielding guards waiting for us.

Crocodile gapes down at me like no one has ever cut off one of his showy little performances before. Tough luck for him if he was hoping for an apology, me Luffy and Jimbei are already rushing through the opening without waiting for him to gather his wits.

“Move it or lose it, panini head! This isn’t the time to stand around looking pretty!” I shout back at him, throwing myself into fighting the scrambling jailers with the other two.

“STOP CALLING ME WEIRD NAMES!” Crocodile shrieks, begrudgingly rushing in after us.

“This is Level Four!” one of the guards yells frantically into a Transponder. “The Warlord Jimbei, former Warlord Crocodile, and the intruders Monkey D. Luffy and E. D. Domino are here! *All four of them are here!* REQUESTING BACK UP, *PLEASE—!”*

I grab him by the executioner facemask and slam him into everyone around him like a battering ram. I duck under a volley of presumably Seastone bullets and catch a glimpse of the fighting going on around me; Luffy punching and kicking with reckless abandon, Jimbei performing what I’m pretty sure is Fishman Karate and just blasting force at swathes of guards with his bare hands, and Crocodile straight up slicing people in half with his sandy arm acting as a scythe and sucking out all the moisture in their bisected bodies.

...Dude that’s ***grewsome as FUCK.***

But damn, whatever the hell Jimbei is doing is cool as shit.

…I decide I wanna do some stupid shit.

We're super deep underwater right now — that's a metric shittone of pressure being put on the building all around us, and theoretically that would disperse all throughout the architecture, especially in load bearing walls and supporting areas.

Like, say, the floor.

Is that true? I have no goddamn idea. Maybe that's rooted in physics, maybe I'm entirely making that shit up. But what's important is if I'm assuming that's how pressure works, if that's my perception of the reality around me…

Well, my Devil Fruit doesn't care about the abstract and precise dealings of reality. My Devil Fruit cares about what *I* think is true.

So, you know what, Imma just pretend that's correct and do what I do best. *Stupid shit.*

I plant my back foot firmly on the ground as a bunch of guys with pitchforks come rushing for me, taking a deep breath and imagining all that pressure being connected to me through my feet and the floor and out to the walls and the ocean itself, then transfer all my weight forward onto my front foot in a hard push. With a sharp twist of my body I yank all that pressure into my back foot as I stomp it forward, *turning* all of that pressure I can practically taste into force that jettisons up out through my hands as I plant them into the chest of the closest guard.

The guard fucking explodes backwards, a concussive impact of concentrated energy condensing into a physical fucking *boom* that blasts the entire cone of guards in front of me away like cannon fire.

I gape at the lump of jailers groaning and twitching on the ground, then at my hands, then at the rest of the people who looked away from their own fighting to stare at whatever I just did.

"I DID *NOT* THINK THAT WOULD WORK!" I proclaim wildly, throwing my arms up like I'm in a stick-up. The guards behind me who weren't unfortunate enough to be in the direction of the blast flinch back at the movement like I'm about to do it again.

Oh wait. Right. Yeah.

Imma do that shit again.

_____

I've never watched a single Star Wars movie in my life, aside from maybe ten minutes of the second one a teacher once put on in class for us unathletic kids who didn't get invited to regional Track and Field before we got sidetracked into a paper snowball fight, and I have no idea if this is how the Force works but if it is no fucking wonder bitches get lost in the sauce of this shit.

"When'd you learn *that?!"* Luffy asks, having migrated over to me at some point as we fight our way through the level, back to back as he swings his arm like a whip and I turn and churn underwater pressure into punchy air like I've got no fucks to give.

"Literally just now!" I respond, laughing hysterically. Let me tell you, suddenly having the ability to perform Shinra Tensei is doing nothing to temper my burgeoning god complex.

I've completely lost track of Crocodile, and Jimbei is a little ways off doing essentially the same thing I'm doing but significantly better and cooler — I am the shitty Shein knockoff version of him right now, I am not going to lie — but we've made what I'm gonna call pretty damn good progress so far.

I've got no clue where the actual stairs up to Desert Hellscape Round 2 are since we came down the uh… *scenic route*... but I thiiiiiiiiink we're getting close? We're back amongst the complex bridges and masses of cages that make up the ass-backwards standard layout of most of this architectural nightmare of a building, so there's that.

Another one of the guards has pulled a Transponder out of fuck knows where and is screaming into it incoherently — it's more open sobbing if I'm being honest — but it's pretty solidly drowned out by the cacophonous arrival of hundreds of gays from behind us, even as the volume of his screaming and crying increase tenfold.

Bon comes careening over to us, spinning like a motorized dreidel and laughing maniacally as he somehow manages to kick out at any of the guards he passes at such speed I literally can't see his leg move. "My friends!" he hollers brightly.

"Bon! Did you get some of that finger steroid juice too?!" Luffy calls excitedly.

"Ok, not calling it that," I protest. "Also hi Benny!"

"I sure diiiiiiiid!" Bon cackles, voice warped by how fast he's still spinning. "I'm feeling WONDERFUL!"

Wow, what must that be like. Can't even imagine it.

Bon suddenly jerks to a pause in his spinning to gape and point at someone behind us. "WHAAAA?! What are you doing here, Mr. 1?!" he shrieks.

Me and Luffy both turn and yup, that's that guy? The only time I ever saw him was when we charged at the officer agents on our way into Alubarna. He's tall dark and built like a brick shithouse, I mean genuinly the dude is basically a *fridge* what the *fuck,* with a shaved head and blank expression leveled at us as his fucking knife arms do their part keeping the guards at bay. Guess that explains Crocodile's disappearing act?

“Who’s this guy?” Luffy asks with a cock of his head.

“He’s the guy who got beaten up by your green friend back in Alabasta!” Bon supplies helpfully.

“Ah, ok. Nobody I know then,” Luffy accepts easily.

I, however, point a scandalized finger at the solid wall of a man. “I had to drag Zoro’s chopped-up ass halfway across the city because of you!” I say in outrage. “The bloodstains never came out of that shirt, I’ll have you know!”

Mr. 1 blinks once, slowly, countenance not budging an inch. “Oops,” he deadpans.

“Yeah, fair enough,” I sigh exasperatedly. “It was *Zoro.* He’s an ass, I get it, I’d stab him too if I didn’t love him so much.” For the first time Mr. 1’s expression changes, twisting into something disgruntled but begrudgingly respecting as he gives me a sharp nod.

I notice Iva in the crowd, mostly because their psycho ass *stabbed themself in the face and grew their head to the size of a Jumbotron,* and that’s just another thing I’m not gonna think too hard about.

“PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, SEND REINFORCEMENTS!” that guard with the Transponder wails desperately. “THEY *WON’T STOP!* ALL THOSE PRISONERS THAT WERE BARELY CONTROLLABLE BEFORE THEIR DISAPPEARANCES ARE… WEARING WEIRDLY PROGRESSIVE OUTFITS..?! I DON’T EVEN *KNOW WHERE* THEY GOT DRAG! AND THEY *JUST PLAIN* ***WON’T STOP!”***

I mean, damn right.

“Diversity win!” I yell, Sparta kicking a jailer over the edge of the bridge we’re on. “A majority of the prisoners kicking your ass are fruity as FUCK!”

Luffy leaves his position at my back, taking point and pressing the advantage as we continue clearing our way through this hot-ass nightmare land with his jaw set firmly and his eyes on fire. “LET’S GOOOOOOOOOO!” he hollers at the top of his lungs. “TO MARINE HEADQUARTERS!”

An answering cheer screams back all around us as I follow directly behind him, charging forward with nowhere to go but up.

Chapter End Notes

You go Ed, keep inventing increasingly weird and unconventional and completely unrealistic ways to use your Devil Fruit. Pop off, my liege.

I'm so ready to get judged because I really have never seen a single Star Wars movie, which is a little depressing because I know damn well I would probably love 'em but at this point the sunk cost fallacy got me by the neck and I've told too many people I've never and will never watch them. I already went back on my word about never watching Bleach, Naruto and One Piece (yeah I promised myself I'd never watch One Piece, see how that fucking turned out), if I do it again people are gonna start realizing I'm a liar. All I know about it is that twink's dad used to be really goddamn hot and someone probably should have put more effort into fucking the evil out of his head but they outlawed love for the space Catholics so instead everyone has to live with the consequences of that. Is any of that true? I wouldn't fucken know I've never watched the movies.

Also stop asking me to pay for your therapy guys I'm traumatizing myself writing this shit if I'm not paying for my own I'm sure as fuck not paying for yours—

EDIT Heeeeeey guys no chapter this week (Sun Dec. 8th) because school is kicking my ass SO HARD. More of an explanation plus some compensation art can be found here, otherwise we'll be back in 2 weeks on the 22nd for more shenanigans and tomfoolery than you can stomach! Love y'all, stay safe and keep kicking ass ♥ xoxo

Chapter 125: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Five: Only The Desperate Ever Make It To The Exit

Chapter Summary

Incandescent Ruins - The Mountain Goats

“Onwards and upwards!” I holler, striking a pose before going straight to kicking *absolute ass* and taking *hella names.*

Chapter Notes

Everyone ignore how late in the day this is coming out and ignore any typos that definitely won't be there because I was absolutely not writing this bitch down to the fucking WIRE. Not me, nope never.

WE'RE SO BACK THOUGH HI GUYS HOW ARE YOU DID YOU MISS ME??? I managed to beat school into submission, minus a a foot or two of my sanity, and I'm hoping I can catch up on writing during my break but we all know how that goes so I'll be back to crunch time for all my writing one way or another no matter what lmao.

Without further ado, please enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Onwards and upwards!” I holler, striking a pose before going straight to kicking *absolute ass* and taking *hella names.*

Our battle towards the stairs is going like, *way* better than I expected it to be going, and I’ve only gotten smacked in the face by a pitchfork *once* so far. That’s practically perfect defence for me!

The rest of our cohort is fairing similarly, spilling through the level like an angry caustic slime or an incensed swarm of wasps, chewing up and spitting out any poor schmuck that gets in the path of destruction.

“Crab guy! Which way?!” Luffy yells from directly in front of me, using his arm to choke out a guard in a move that would make any meteor hammer enthusiast drool.

“Left!” Inazuma hollers from where he’s leveraging strips of the ground like comically large slapsticks, jabbing the direction he means with his big ol’ scissor arm.

There’s a bout of cheering from further back on the bridge as I think someone gets ahold of the keys and starts opening cages, but it’s interspersed with the sudden hysterical screaming as a force of Blugori arrive heralded by that same flute music we heard Saldeath make earlier.

There’s a cracking boom behind us as Iva sets off another wink like a high speed cannon, and the unnerving noises of the Blugori are abruptly cut from the clamouring prison ambiance.

“WHAT THE FUCK *IS THAT THING?!”* someone frantically sobs over the din, probably referring to Iva’s tank-sized head.

“Straw-boy, Eddie-baby, you can’t just stick around here!” Iva’s tank-sized head calls to us from their position. We both glance back. “Leave the enemies to us! Keep going, going, going! GO!”

“You got it!” I yell back, hoisting a thumbs up and turning forward again.

“Alright, thanks!” Luffy adds before his attention is snagged by the cacophonous arrival of the three remaining Demon Guards and… goddamn motherfucking *Sadi.*

Capricious assbag.

“Luffy and Ed, keep moving! I will go to their aid!” Jimbei announces from our left. “I have little power to speak of on dry land, but…”

“Really?! You seem pretty strong!” Luffy asks incredulously.

“I think you’re selling yourself short, my guy!” I add with a side-eye.

The agitating grating sound of Sadi’s voice cuts right through the noise and any aggravation I had in my body triples in amount. “Now, Demon Guards, attack!” she squalls.

If that wasn’t enough, the sudden outcry of screaming and shrieks of pain sure is. We switch gears in a split second, literally in Luffy’s case, and spin back on the ungodly monstrosities without another moment of hesitation.

Jimbei doing the exact same thing is expected because he’s a good dude and an honourable guy, but *Crocodile* turning back I’m perfectly willing to attribute to an intense hatred for the screaming. I’m simply not generous enough to believe he’s doing it to be nice.

Either way, all three Jailer Beasts are taken down extremely fast with extreme prejudice.

Sadi starts shrieking at the top of her lungs like an irate toddler, and that is immensely satisfying if not slightly annoying, but all it really serves to do is draw my attention to her position like a fucking bloodhound.

The nightmare in hot pink is, conveniently, standing right in our path with a pitchfork clutched in one hand and her bitchass whip in the other. She looks pissed to high heaven — nourishment for the soul, for the record — and ready to take this whole damn bridge down with her if so provoked.

Well. Obviously I’m nothing if not *so* provoking.

“Ed,” Luffy comments lightly from where he’s flawlessly keeping pace with my sudden breakneck sprint, “your face is doing that scary thing again.”

“No it’s not,” I rebuff, making absolutely no effort to wipe the bloodthirsty and indisputably scary snarl of a grin off my face.

Sadi seems to clock my hell-bent for leather stampede in the same moment she cracks her whip down on a row of unfortunate gays, obliterating a section of the bridge as her entire being seems to ignite in rage at the simple sight of me.

God that’s good for my ego.

It’s with wordless roaring and the furious outrage of at least six generations of my ancestors baying for blood behind me that I lunge for the guttersnipe, intent on sending her to god same day delivery.

That’s kinda interrupted by the hand that snags into my collar and straight up YEETS my ass over her head in a high arch that renders my frantic and half-assed swipes obsolete due to distance. At least seven generations of my ancestors boo loudly behind me.

“I thought I told you to go forth! HEE-HAW!” Iva’s voice, higher in register than I’ve heard so far, crows from behind me as *another* hand latches into my clothing and the distinctive feeling of Luffy’s body smacking into mine preludes both of us tumbling onto the bridge at the front of the horde.

“HEY! THAT’S *MY* GRUDGE MATCH!” I holler back at Iva as I get my head on straight, by the way Iva is a giant woman now and I genuinely have no idea when that happened, as they (she?) nearly take Sadi’s head off with a kick.

“Out of our way, eccentric little girl!” Iva orders with an unhinged grin, ignoring my complaining.

“So you’ve turned into a, mmmmh, woman, Ivankov!” Sadi sneers back, crouched from where she narrowly dodged the kick. “You anarchist of sexes!” Damn I hope I get called something that sick one day.

Iva just throws their (her?) head back and laughs. “What can I say, I’m in a feminine mood!” Then they’re (she’s?) swinging out with another kick and I am deeply upset by this usurpation.

“Don’t ignore me! I deserve this one!” I whine loudly as Luffy hauls me up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes while I shake errant fists at what should be my fight.

“Is that lady Iva? She talks funny like Iva does,” Luffy mumbles offhandedly.

“I’ll be sure to slap her around for you, Eddie-baby!” Iva cackles maniacally.

“And choking!” I demand in a screech. “EXCESSIVE CHOKING! *ENOUGH CHOKING SHE CHOKES ON IT!”*

It’s not a lot to ask for. I think I’m being entirely reasonable.

“What a grudge,” Crocodile mutters with a dark chuckle. Fuckin’ weirdo.

“That insufferable little wretch—” Sadi growls before she’s cut off by a barrage of Iva’s attacks. Even still, she manages to look my way with a hateful glower.

I blow her a big dramatic mocking kiss. “Suck a cock you vanglorious bitch!” I croon over Luffy’s shoulder. Crocodile starts honest to god cackling from beside us.

Sadi makes an outraged squawk, and I take *extreme* pleasure in Iva landing a blow that sends her ass over teakettle with a vindictive glee that comes right from the angry pit in my chest.

“Hurry up you two, the stairs are close by!” Inazuma directs with a pointed jerk of his chin. “I’ll open the door!”

“THIS IS THE FORTRESS OF HELL! LISTEN, ALL OF YOU!” a voice booms from the exact direction we need to go. I twist around and brace an arm across the top of Luffy’s head to get a view of the speaker. Hannyabal, in a way that a giant pot-bellied *thing* of a man in a pharaoh-esque headdress really has no right to be, is an intimidating fucking figure as he spins this wicked double-ended spear in a way that sends rioters flying. “YOU SHALL NOT PASS!”

Holy mother of god. That was SICK AS FUCK?

“Who’s this guy?!” Luffy asks impatiently. “He’s opening the door!”

“The Vice Warden of the jail!” Inazuma grunts back.

“YOOOOO! Is it just me, or was that fucking *AWESOME?!* Pop OFF Gandalf!” I cheer incredulously. Never thought I’d see the day.

One of the guys who got knocked on his ass by him gives me a betrayed look and I shoot him an apologetic grin.

I can see the way the reaction takes Hannyabal aback, and the instinctual urge to preen at the praise shudder through him, but that’s all fettered behind the mask of professionalism that feels downright out of place on this freakshow.

He gestures back to the open door, which inconveniently has revealed a metric fuckton of prison guards with goddamn bazookas of all things — it really does have to be said, these people clearly give ZERO fucks about the property damage they cause to their own prison in the pursuit of catching our bitchasses — as one of them fires his weapon at an unsuspecting escapee, trapping him in the nets those things apparently shoot.

“Behold! The stairwell to Level Three is guarded by a bazooka squad a thousand men strong, all equipped with prison cannon balls!” Hannyabal proclaims. “You will not leave this place alive! For a brighter future for the common man, unprecedented intruders Strawhat and Detective of the Damned! Since the Chief isn’t here, I shall carry out your death sentences!”

“MOVE, Gandalf!” Luffy demands in a shout.

Oops. That’s my bad.

“I REFUSE!” he shouts back.

Shit are we the Balrog?

“Hannya!” some of the prison staff around us start …singing..? Like fullblow, unironic musical number singing. These guys *have* to have some kinda karaoke or musical theatre night because *what?* “Hannya! The rhythm!” they continue, and Hannyabal seems to puff up in response and starts swinging that double ended spear around wildly. “Hannya! The nyabal!”

If I start singing We Are! in retaliation would that be too distracting?

And then the double ended spear catches on *fucking fire* and Luffy is bodily throwing me out of the way as Hannyabal reels forward in a bright pinwheel of flaming sharp *ouch.*

I catch my weight on a toe and a heel, fingers barely skimming the ground to balance myself before they fit into the familiar grips of my pistols. Then, with precision and no mercy to speak of, I start firing into the crowd of bazooka wielding guards at anyone who looks like their trigger finger so much as *itches.*

“Stop stopping me!” Luffy snarls. “I need to go save Ace!”

“Don’t make me laugh!” Hannyabal barks. “If I were to be defeated so easily, I wouldn’t be deserving of my title!”

There's the sensation of a crisp finger snap at the edge of my conscience, and I duck and roll to the side as Luffy and Hannyabal's fight passes right over me in a blazing arch. Luffy is deflecting strikes off his burnished and smoldering forearms, mid-leap backwards with his full attention on his opponent as he seamlessly avoids the sharp sweep of my leg swinging hard as iron into Hannyabal's ankles.

My attention is centred firmly on the bazooka squad, whom I'm stilling firing potshots at, as Hannyabal is taken off balance and loses the momentum of his swinging long enough for Luffy to sink an absolute haymaker of a punch into his face and put him squarely on his ass.

"I'm not done yet!" Hannyabal wheezes out, staggering to his feet despite the fact that hit, by all rights, should have been a knockout.

I'm aware of Hannyabal surging back to action in the same vague sort of way I'm aware of Luffy retaliating head-on (literally) with his fists — a passenger seat 'I'm tryna connect the Bluetooth and set the GPS up at the same time can you gimme a sec,' feeling met evenly with the driver side 'alright I'll just go straight until we hit an intersection you let me know which turning lane I gotta get into,' impression of that mental finger snap.

Said snap rings again, and my only reaction is to squint at the firelight invading my view without ceasing my assault as Luffy's back lands across my own, his weight beared like a crutch while he parries a strike from Hannyabal straight upwards and smashes a kick leveraged off my mass into his rotund stomach.

Hannyabal goes flying over us both from the hit, and I feel Luffy shove his hat down on top of mine with enough force my head bobs. In perfect tandem Luffy is flipping his legs over his head to land on my other side and I'm rolling to get a better vantage point into the stairway as the front uh…

There's really no delicate way of saying this. The area right at the door is now a bunch of corpses so I'm really having to shoot further in to get anybody. I feel a tad bit vile.

Hannyabal goes down for what has to be the fifth time at least. Out of the corner of my eyes I see Luffy barely turn to — presumably — request the return of his hat, before the absolute fucking madlad of the hour some-fucking-how manages to get back on his motherfucking feet.

“Ok what the fuck,” I mutter in disbelief, still not taking my eyes off the guards. “What is this guy *taking?* Pure fucking *methamphetamine?”*

He’s relying heavily on his spear thing and drenched in his own blood, but for a startling moment he seems like the most dangerous obstacle this place has to offer. It’s enough to drag my focus from my task for the first time since he and my Captain started fighting.

“How dare you…” he rasps through vocal chords I know for a fucking fact took a direct punch not even a minute ago. “Your only accomplishment is reaching infamy in the outside world… as a pirate, and now as a rebel!”

“V — Vice Warden! Don’t get up, you’ll die!” one of the guards, who was definitely singing for him earlier I’d recognize that vibrato anywhere, cries out.

“You’ll save your brother?! That’s very touching coming from the scum of the planet!” Hannyabal continues regardless. “Common people lose their loved ones day after day and are so terrified that they can’t sleep! All because men like *you* are out at sea! *This is the fortress of hell, built for the sole purpose of locking up villains so even the frailest can feel safe out there! If I were to collapse, this world would become one ruled by fear! I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU A SINGLE STEP FURTHER!”*

It’s… *admirable,* it’s downright impossible to outright dismiss from a logical standpoint, it’s doctrine and ideology I can agree with to a certain point and *still…*

It’s not our job, *my* job, to convince this man or any other that *we’re* common people losing loved ones. That there are far worse than *us* terrifying people into sleeplessness. That *we deserve to feel safe, too.*

It’s not the time or the place.

“Any other day I would fucking LOVE to have a philosophical debate with you about the ethics of torture and how you go about defining ‘common people’ from ‘common scum,’ and

exactly who you willingly extend this protection to, but THAT SHIT IS GONNA HAVE TO WAIT!" I shout hoarsely. Today is taking its pound of flesh right from my throat one way or another. "YOU EITHER STAND DOWN, OR BE *MADE TO FUCKING SIT!"*

There isn't even a crack in his expression. Surrounded on all sides and more than half dead on his feet, Vice Warden Hannyabal doesn't waver, he doesn't lower his spear, and he doesn't stand down.

I snap at the edge of Luffy's consciousness. I roll smoothly to my feet as Luffy stalks forward, fists clasped together, and cracks them down hard like a bell toll on Hannyabal's dome. He crumples to the floor, and cries of shock and dismay echo from his troops.

"I respect that guy," I sigh, spinning and holstering my guns and reaching up to take Luffy's hat off the top of my own. I hold it out towards him as I walk for the Level Three stairs and he does the same.

My respect doesn't buy mercy. It's not the time or the place.

———

We make it a good two thirds of the way up the stairs before the screaming news of fucking Minotaurus of all things is back up and swinging, as well as the apoplectic approach of Chief Warden Magellen.

"Oooooh girl start running faster," I wheeze, trying to do that and really not accomplishing much. *"Fuck* I should have hit the Stairmaster more."

I can't believe we made it through the bazooka squad — fairly easily, in part due to my strategic thinning and in part due to the devastating blow of Hannyabal's defeat to their morale — just for me to fall to the *fucking stairs.*

"I always knew I'd die this way," I mumble deliriously.

Luffy's hand snaps into mine faster than I can blink. "Nope. Not allowed," he denies immediately, no sympathy for my fervent wish to be put out of my misery.

"Yeah yeah, no unsanctioned death on your watch," I moan miserably. Because I'm in misery. And want to be put out of it.

"There's something wrong with you," Crocodile mutters in disgust from where he, contrary to said disgust, is sticking fairly close to us.

"I'm taking no shit from a man who can fly up this torture device disguised as a convenient transition from height levels," I hiss with a glare that scrunches my nose.

He gives me a look of disdain and smugness in equal measure. "Careful Detective Domino, there's not enough room in this stairwell for your inflated ego *and* your cloying jealousy—"

The end of that vile slander against my good name is cut off by the guttural roaring of a voice nearly inhuman. "STRAWHAT!" it bellows, and I swear to god every single hair in the fucking building stands on end with it. "I WON'T LET YOU SET A SINGLE FOOT OUTSIDE!"

"That's the poison guy!" Luffy gasps.

I immediately tighten my hand around his. "Oh you're staying the *fuck* away from that guy, absolutley the fuck not," I deadpan with a shudder. "He's what the homies call detrimental to my mental health vis a vis causing your gorgeous ass hella bodily harm. Abso-fucking-lutely not."

Luffy worries his lip between his teeth for a second, humming high in his throat before reluctantly nodding. "If I can help it," he says diplomatically.

“That’s Luffy-speak for ‘if I end up fighting him because I gotta, don’t get mad.’ You’re not fucken fooling me,” I scoff affectionately. Luffy just shrugs with a cute little smile. This fucking guy.

After a hellish eternity, we finally reach the top of the godforsaken stairs. Inazuma slices the door to ribbons, and we’re back in Desert Hellscape Round 2.

“‘No evil this time,’ he says,” I say mockingly under my breath. “‘No hook guy,’ he says. Now we just need a goddamn princess and it really *is* Desert Hellscape Round 1 all over again.”

Luffy shoots me a look that’s an apology, a muffled attempt at hiding how hilarious he finds this situation, and a reprimand on account of the ‘evil’ comment all in one. Crocodile just looks at me like he wants to strangle me but doesn’t know exactly what for.

“The jail is surrounded on all sides by Marine battleships and the jail’s private vessels,” Jimbei suddenly comments from Luffy’s other side. “If we steal one of those, we should be able to make it in time for the execution!”

“Excellent plan, really the *only* plan, but I’ve got one little question,” I say, voice high and tight. “Do we have a plan to get past the Gates of Justice, or are we just praying that part works out?” Because like HELL am I leaving Bon behind to get those things open.

Jimbei blinks slowly before his face pinches into an interesting expression. “Ah. I… forgot about that,” he says slowly.

I turn to look at him blankly. “You… *forgot..?”* I repeat just as slowly.

Jimbei averts his eyes. “I don’t suppose *you* have a plan?” he asks, tentative and hopeful.

“Uuuuuuuuuuh…” I avert my eyes. *“Well.* Um. Oh wait, actually,” I mutter, shoving my hand into my pocket and rusting around until I find what I’m looking for. I extract the

Hokage from where he's been chilling (poor guy really has been in there too long, he's gonna deserve a whole salad bar when this is over) and flick open the shell of the Black Transponder.

The Hokage blinks sleepy eyestalks at me and I give the darling an apologetic smile. "Hello dear, so sorry but could you give me a little listen in on the comms chatter?" I plead. I get another slow blink and then he starts wiggling his eyestalks around like antennae.

"—lost contact with…monitoring room!" a voice comes cries out of the Hokage's mouth, static and panic clinging to the edges in equal measure. "We have — of reaching… eadquarters, and th—" the voice cuts in and out, and the snail's eyes stalks twitch like he's annoyed, before reconfiguring in a way reminiscent of bent TV antennas when they won't bring the picture through cleanly and you're just trying shit in hopes it'll work. There's another burst of intense static, and then the voice comes in much clearer. "—no external communication! We're on our own, so don't fail no matter what!"

Then the Hokage nods his eyestalks in a job well done, and promptly falls back asleep.

I blink blankly at him and then my companions. "Uh. Well I guess my idea to co-op a Marine identification code and pretend to be calling as backup from outside the Gate with orders to open it isn't gonna fly," I say flatly.

"Great. Fantastic, even," Crocodile growls. "How were you even planning on *getting* this identification code?"

I laugh awkwardly and side eye both him and Jimbei. "Well I figure both of you have spent time on Marineford, you have to have overheard at least *one* in your time there, right..? Haha…" I trail off.

"Alright, so let's come up with a new plan," Jimbei deadpans.

I am embarrassed.

“So. If we can get someone in the Generator Room, the technicians in there will be able to open the Gates, it’s just a matter of how the fuck we can make them do that..?” I offer lamely. “And even then, we need those gates opened then closed *immediately* behind us, so the window of opportunity to get from there to the ship we steal will be uh…”

“Someone will need to stay behind, then,” Crocodile observes.

“No!” I immediately rebuff. “No. There’s gotta be some other option, I’ve just gotta… think of one.”

Crocodile gives me this pitying and condescending look that bristles over my hackles. “You better think of one before we reach the exit, then,” he says haughtily. I glower at him but say nothing.

Maybe it’s the fact that there’s burning hot sand under our feet making us run faster, maybe it’s my intense and zealous hatred and need to not be surrounded by said hot sand, maybe it’s the shrieks of pain as people start literally fucking *melting* due to the giant hydra made of *poison* chasing us; but we make it across this level in record time.

Do a bunch of people die and it’s a neck and neck race the entire time fueled by anxious terror and impending doom? Yes, but what else is new.

The doorway to the stairwell to the Petting Zoo on MDMA looks like a gigantic fucking melted hole in the wall, which is a little concerning, but overall not my fucking problem. Inazuma and Iva both stand at the entrance and usher people through.

“Hurry hurry, Magellan is quite literally RIGHT behind us!” Iva shouts cheerily, waving as we pass.

“Thanks Iva, you’re my hero!” I holler with a bright grin.

“You flatter me darling!” Iva cackles back as we once again start up the *fucking stairs.* I don’t think this is *supposed* to be worse than the actual torture I endured here, but it sure fucking *feels* like it.

“This is the actual worst,” I whine pathetically.

Thank whatever god is looking out for us though, these ones are significantly less tall and evil than the last ones. In fact, we’re out and sprinting through the Petting Zoo, punting Manticores like footballs, no sooner than the stairs nearly break my spirit.

“Wasn’t the poison guy right behind us?!” Luffy asks confusedly after a few minutes without the screaming and hissing of melting people.

“Inazuma and Iva stayed behind to stall him! Don’t worry, they know what they’re doing!” I reassure him.

“They’re fighting him?!” Luffy does a double take and gives me a pinched expression. “I wanna go back, but if you say they got this…” I just give him a firm nod.

“Just keep moving, we gotta have faith they’ll be alright, no joke!” Bon proclaims from where he’s been nearby this entire time.

“What’s up with this floor? It’s practically abandoned,” Crocodile comments, and he’s totally right.

“It is strange,” Jimbei agrees. “All the prisoners are gone and the cages are open. Do you think someone might have freed them?”

“Without a doubt,” I laugh. “We aren’t the only idiots in this prison, we’ll probably run into the other ones later!”

And that's exactly what we do. There's nothing left on the Petting Zoo floor to stop us, not even an excess of guards to fight through, so we manage to cross and exit the level even faster than we tripped through the damn place on our way down.

The clamouring crowd of prisoners waiting for us in the not Mean Red Forest of Knives part of the Mean Red Forest of Knives level is so busy screaming bloody murder about the Jailer Beasts they don't even notice our arrival.

In fact, until Buggy runs headlong into Crocodile while fleeing for his life, they have no idea we're standing right in front of them. "Damnit, watch where you're—!" Buggy cuts himself off as his jaw drops and his eyes pop from their sockets. "WH— *CROCODILE?!"*

"B — B — B — BOSS?!" Mr. 3 shrieks, his face doing the same thing.

"You, Mr. 3? What's a useless piece of trash like you doing here..?" Crocodile inquires disdainfully. The poor fuck *wilts,* and I watch Jimbei and Luffy both tank the Jailer Beasts idly without raising a finger to help.

"Captain Buggy! The Demon Guards have been defeated!" someone hollers, pointing to the bloody pile of them.

"STRAWHAAAAAAAAAAT?!" Buggy and 3 screech together. "A — AND THE *WARLORD JIMBEI?!"*

Luffy's head perks up and he smiles over at them. "Oh! Alright, you guys are ok!" he says happily. They both take that like a kick to the balls.

"B — but if he's here, why isn't…" Mr. 3 hisses, head swivelling around every direction but mine.

"T — The annoying little Detective…" Buggy mutters, looking for all the world like his heart is breaking.

“Yeah? What’s up?” I ask. They both spin to me with white-faced shock and I raise an eyebrow. “Uh, you guys ok?”

“YOU’RE ALIVE?!” they both scream.

I furrow my brow. “Of course? Despite this place’s best efforts, I mean.”

They both start wailing. Like full honest-to-god blubbering. Then I’ve got two full grown men clinging to me and shaking me. “Alright what the fuck,” I blurt in complete confusion, awkwardly patting them on the backs.

“SHUT UP!” Buggy demands shrilly, springing away and scrubbing at his eyes. “It’s not like we were worried or anything!”

“We totally thought you died!” 3 cries defensively, also jumping back and turning away with an upturned nose. “I mean, those guards grabbed you!”

“Uh. Yeah I’m fine dude,” I offer, then shake my head. “What the fuck are we doing? Fucking MOVE! We’ve got an angry Warden on our heels, it’s time to BOOK IT!”

*“YOU **WHAT?!”*** they both scream at the tops of their lungs.

There’s a hissing crash from behind us, and I just fucking KNOW Magellan’s poison hydra is back in pursuit.

“TIME TO LEAVE!” I yelp, bursting back into sprinting for my life with the metaphorical clown and the actual clown right behind me and my Captain and our escape route dead ahead of me. “GET A MOVE ON, PEANUT GALLERY!”

Chapter End Notes

Y'all I really though we'd be outta Impel Down by now but this fucking arc will NOT LET ME OUT. There is NO escape until the writing gods say so TOT

Also I almost hit a red Honda Civic with the door of my car getting out of it a couple days ago, oh how the turn tables.

Anyway merry early Christmas to those who celebrate, happy holidays and general well wishes to everyone else, and very early happy New Years to all!

Chapter 126: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Six: I Can't Do This Alone

Chapter Summary

Exit Music (For a Film) - Radiohead

"HOW COULD THINGS *POSSIBLY* BE GETTING WORSE?!" Buggy screams at the top of his lungs. I really do have to agree.

Chapter Notes

Everyone has to ignore how late in the day this badboy is coming out. Because I said so.

It's back to the soul crushing grind of school tomorrow, but I'm carefully optimistic about how my schedule is going to treat me this time. For now. So here's a fucking mammoth of a chapter (it's 4.8k but let's be honest by my standards at this point that's really not that big lmao) to kick off my new semester and the new year!

Oh and guess what? We made it out of Impel Down we fucking made it WHAT?! YEAH BOY LAST CHAPTER IN THE PRISON, DRINK IT IN AND HAVE FUN! The song choice felt appropriate given the occasion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"MAGELLAN TOO?! WHAT THE FUCK IS *WRONG* WITH THIS *FLOOR?!"* Buggy shrieks, nearly tripping me by stepping on the backs of my shoes from how close he's running behind.

"I haven't done anything nearly bad enough to deserve this!" Mr. 3 wheezes, looking one small stumble from passing out or passing away, and I honestly couldn't say which direction he's leaning.

I all but tackle Luffy back into motion when he doesn't immediately spring into the same adrenaline-fueled run we've adopted. "Babes, it's time to put on some speed! Get the fucking lead out or it's lead poisoning in all our futures!" I demand, repeatedly slapping his arms.

“What about Iva and the crab guy?!” he asks, letting himself be ushered but not being any help at all and not taking his eyes off the approaching fifth horsemen.

“They’re certified badasses, don’t worry about them!” I yelp, using my grip on him to save myself from tripping over the lip of an uneven stone. “It’ll be really embarrassing if we meet at the entrance and we’re all dosed up on TTX and *dying!”*

“The fuck’s TTX?!” Buggy yawps, the green invading his complexion really clashing with his colour palette.

“Neurotoxin!” me and Jimbei answer at the same time. I blink over at the Fishman, who blinks back at me, and try very hard to be normal while gesturing for him to go ahead.

“It’s found in many types of pufferfish and other aquatic animals, if there’s any in that poison hydra of his we can all expect very slow and painful deaths!” he explains concisely. “Now we must hurry toward the exit without delay! The situation has changed for the worse, and we have bigger things to worry about than Magellan!”

“HOW COULD THINGS *POSSIBLY* BE GETTING WORSE?!” Buggy screams at the top of his lungs. I really do have to agree.

“EVERYONE TAKE COVER, THE HYDRA IS COMING!” someone somehow manages to scream louder than even Buggy.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!” is the general sentiment of most people present, myself included, as a head of the motherfucking 20 foot tall multi-headed pure poison snake monster of DEATH descends upon us like a fucking tsunami.

My instinctive hindbrain urge to tackle everyone close to me to the ground like my scrawny ass could provide any actual cover nearly sends me and Luffy into the floor, but Mr. 3 screeching “OHMYGOD—” and pivoting in a sharp turn has me holding off.

There's a loud SPLAT — nearly as comical as it is terrifying — as a huge white dam of wax surges into existence, interposed between us and the 20-foot-poison-monster-of-death, stopping its gooey purple jaws dead in their tracks.

"Oh wow," I murmur in appreciation, staring up as Luffy makes a quiet sound of awe beside me.

"The optimism you people have is sickeningly infectious!" 3 huffs, knees shaking but jaw set. "Why, if I let my guard down for even a second, I even start thinking of you people as friends!"

Wait why are we only friends when his guard is down?

"3 guy!" Luffy gasps.

"Get out of here while you can! I won't be able to keep this up for long!" he shouts, and we all gracefully ignore the way his voice wavers in favour of the reluctant determination he's exuding. "I'll be damned if I stay in the debt of a couple Strawhats!"

A) *cannot* believe that worked, B) that was cool as *fuck!*

"Wax, huh?" Magellan growls from where he's still waaaaaay too close to us for comfort.

"That's right! My wax is as hard as steel, your venom won't be getting past it!" 3 boasts, sweating way too much for the amount of confidence he's trying to project.

"Heh, the way some Devil Fruit abilities interact with each other really baffles me…" Crocodile chuckles, narrowing his eyes at the matchup.

“Yeah you *would* say that, wouldn’t you,” I scoff.

His eyes snap to me with a look of indignance bubbling into outrage. *“What* was that?”

“Sorry, does the former Warlord who got his ass kicked because his opponent was *wet* have something to say?” I snark back.

“Do you need a refresher on how many times I put your scrawny Captain in the ground, or do you want a demonstration?” he snarls.

“Ed, I’m gonna fight the poison guy with 3 guy!” Luffy announces, clearly not having paid an ounce of attention to what we were bickering about.

“HAH?!” me and 3 shriek at the same time.

“I’m not fighting this guy, are you CRAZY?!” 3 screeches, eyes wide and horrified behind his cracked glasses. “I can only guard against him! And since I’m sure as hell not doing *that,* I’m running!”

“It hasn’t even been half an hour, you can’t go back on your word that fast!” I squawk. “You tryna give me heart issues on top of everything I’ve already got?! HUH?! I could pull off silver hair before 20, *but that doesn’t mean I WANT TO!”*

“I’m sorry!” he apologizes, looking more excited than sorry, like an asshole. “I had an idea though! And you gotta figure out whatever it was you were figuring out, so even though I don’t like it, you go ahead!”

I strangle a scream behind my teeth, shaking hands poised to throttle him. “You’re infuriating! INFURIATING!” I whinge, grabbing his face and pushing a forceful kiss into his cheek. “If you catch anything from this guy, I’m burning your fucking body like a plague victim! I fucking MEAN IT!”

“I love you too, good luck!” he says brightly, hand clamping down on 3’s wrist when he turns to follow as I turn to run.

“See you up top!” I groan loudly, falling into step with the two former Warlords. Or is Jimbei technically still a Warlord? Did they revoke his membership? Whatever.

“Unquestionably!” Luffy laughs loudly, and the surge of fondness is enough to keep me from turning back around to drag him with us.

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“I need it to be known that I am incredibly unhappy!” I announce petulantly, roundhouse kicking (or whatever the hell passes for it when you’ve never had formal martial arts training and are just letting your body do whatever the fuck it’s doing) a guard right into unconsciousness.

“Trust me, we can tell!” Buggy yells, smacking another guard over the head with a sword he got from god knows where. Notably doesn’t stab him, just fucking *whacks* him. I mean then he stabs another guy right through the damn liver but yaknow. It es what it es.

“Just because you’re pissy about missing your *boyfriend* doesn’t mean you need to make it everyone else’s problem,” Crocodile sneers, catching a jailer by the face and sucking every last drop of moisture out of their body before tossing them unceremoniously to the floor. *Yikes*.

I sock another guard in the face, frowning as I try to use that repulsion bullshit from earlier and find it significantly weaker than before (I guess as we move up there’s less water pressure for me to redirect? Maybe???), and squint at him. “I don’t know how, but you’re being hypocritical right now. I can feel it.”

Crocodile whips his head towards me with his teeth bared to say something scathing before Buggy is making this strangled screaming sound and flails his sword at the both of us.

“KNOCK IT OFF! We’re finally at the front of the damn prison, we don’t need you two killing each other *NOW!”*

“He’s right!” I grunt in agreement, flipping a guy over my shoulder before shooting him point blank in the chest. “And he’s my husband, you sandy fuck, so shove it!”

“Dear god, who let you two bozos *marry?”* Crocodile gags. Rude ass bitch.

“Congratulations on your union, have you come up with a plan yet or shall we improvise?” Jimbei asks, sliding in on my left and absolutely ass blasting a big clump of jailers with a concentrated shove of his hands.

“FUCK you’re literally so cool,” I curse. “And let’s all keep in mind just how much brain damage and how many concussions I’m juggling right now in tandem with a truly mind boggling amount of bodily pain, but I DO have the vague notions of a plan!”

“Vague notions?” Jimbei repeats dryly.

“It’s a plan in the same way I’m conscious; half hope, half prayer, and no doubt going to be carried by pure luck and the will of god by the end,” I say with an honest shrug. “Yeah it’s high stakes but we can do it because we’re insane.”

“Could you make it sound any less comforting?!” Buggy hisses shrilly.

“That is inconceivably stupid,” Crocodile deadpans.

“Well I didn’t see anyone else holding off a brain bleed with nothing but moxy while thinking up an alternative plan,” I say primly. My compatriots are begrudgingly silent. “That’s what I thought. So here’s where we’re at: we need the Gates open, the technicians need to open the Gate because we’re stupid/dumb/useless, we gotta be on a boat ready to nyoom when the Gate opens so it can be closed behind us, and chances are Magellan will be ready to shut down the whole operation the second he’s aware of it.”

“I’m already not an optimistic person but you’re fucking pushing me with this shit,” Buggy grits out.

“Cope. Anyone we leave behind to keep those technicians in check will likely have to fight Magellan, so. Yaknow. They can’t be weaksauce or we’re all fucked. Of course if Magellan is out of commish that’s ideal, but while I do so adore our folks back there trying to beat him up I have about no faith that’s how that shit’s gonna end,” I ramble.

“Can you get to the point,” Crocodile says testily.

“Don’t be a dick. So we need someone who can convince the tecs, at the very least hold their own against Magellan, and ideally make it to a ship that’s really fucking far away really fucking fast,” I say matter-of-factly.

“Uuuuuuuuuh…” all three of them drone, slowly cocking their heads to the side before tilting them forward.

I look up and stare resignedly at the ceiling for a long beat.

If you want something done with the objectively correct amount of casualties, you gotta cock that gun yourself.

“If I die in a fucking room that literally exists to open one specific door, don’t tell my story, tell an idealized version where I’m not too concussed to make good choices,” I moan miserably.

“How exactly are you planning to get to the, and I quote, ‘ship that’s really fucking far away really fucking fast?’” Crocodile asks dryly. Notably doesn’t protest, like a dick.

“Eh, I flew across Enies Lobby not even ten minutes after I got my Devil Fruit and managed to land right on top of a guy without breaking any more of my bones than were previously broken, so I probably got this. They’ll have a window, right? Right?” I say with a half-hysterical half-consternate laugh.

The pitying and disparaging looks I receive in return are answer enough.

“How, praytell, do you plan on convincing those technicians to open the Gates for us?” Buggy groans in between trying to smother himself to death with his hands.

I shrug. “I’ll be my usual charming self, I guess. And it’s not like there’s a shortage of guard uniforms to throw over my shit if I need a disguise,” I offer, gesturing loosely to the surplus of incapacitated jailers strewn around us.

Buggy grabs Crocodile by the arm (much to his clear disgruntlement) and turns him around. “So this is gonna bomb, inevitably, do we have a backup plan?” he whispers incredibly loudly.

Crocodile turns back around. “Don’t touch me,” he deadpans.

Buggy immediately lets go of him like he’s been burned and takes three giant steps away. “Right, yes, of course, so sorry!”

I roll my eyes and take my hat off, offering it to Jimbei. He takes it with a questioning look. “You mind holding onto that for me for a bit? I’m thinking it’s not gonna be… *ideal* where I’m headed,” I ask. “Careful with it though, yeah? It’s important to me.”

Jimbei gives me a solemn nod. “I’ll protect it with my life,” he promises, tucking it away.

I flash him a wry smile. “I appreciate that, but if it comes down to it I think you’re the priority over my hat.” He huffs a quiet laugh while I reach down and snatch a beret or

whatever the guard's caps are off the head of one groaning on the ground. "Besides, this should keep my head warm until I get it back."

I tuck my hair up into the hat while Buggy makes a high pitched sound, now standing on my opposite side and as far away from Crocodile as possible. "Do you even know where you're going?" he asks dubiously.

I give Buggy a sly smirk as I crouch down in front of the guard who's hat I'm wearing, who is looking more and more like he wishes whoever took him down had just killed him instead. "Don't you worry your pretty head about that, you just focus on getting us that ship," I say sweetly, plucking the sunglasses sitting crookedly on his nose off and settling them on my face. "I'm sure this fine gentleman will make sure I know where I'm going."

The fine gentleman whimpers and shrinks back in fear.

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I walk primly but swiftly down the stone corridors of upper Impel down, ignoring how weird my stolen uniform feels over the clothes I'm already wearing, resolutely bound for the Generator Room via the instructions gleaned from the unfortunate donator of said clothing (who was left in an alcove unconscious like four hallways back).

I shove the indicated door open with as much confidence as exists in my body, and glare harshly at all the people whose heads snap towards me from where they're positioned in front of machinery I couldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of operating myself.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" I bark at the lot of them, beelining to a specific guard as soon as my eyes lock onto the Transponder beside him. "You think a crisis is the time to be sitting on your asses?!"

"U — Uh, sir! What do you—" he starts to say before I reach him and drag him towards me with a fistful of uniform.

“You have orders, why the nine hells are you non fulfilling them?!” I snarl. It still feels pretty good to use all the frustration that’s been building throughout this trip for something productive.

“O — Orders, sir? What orders?!” he asks frantically, leaning as far away from me as he can with my grip on him. “We didn’t get any orders!”

“The goddamn orders from Magellan! Don’t tell me your fucking comms are broken too!” I yell, taking the in and snatching the Transponder from the desk. I give it a performative look over before rounding on the room at large, who all happen to be staring at me in abject fear and palpable apprehension. I growl low in my throat and release my hold on the guard. “Just my *fucking luck!* Magellan sent orders up to open the fucking Gates, and if this shit doesn’t happen *exactly* when he wants because of a fucking *communication error,* we’re all in *deep shit!”*

“What are you talking about?” the guard cries, panicked looks darting between me and the snail. “We didn’t get any orders!”

“Then here’s your orders now!” I sneer, shaking my fist at him. “Do you fucking job or more than our reputation goes down the shitter!”

“But sir, opening the Gates?! Why would we *do* that?!” he asks frantically.

“Aid, you numbskull!” I holler. “The firepower we need to put this insurrection to bed for good is behind that gate, and you’re about to cost us this whole operation with your ignorance!”

I’ve made the executive decision that my plan, which I was certain would fail back on Desert Hellscape Round 2, is actually a very good idea and I am simply hot and sexy enough to make it work, lack of external communication be damned.

“I thought we had no chance of external aid because of the line to Marine HQ being blocked?!” he shrieks.

“We managed the confirmation of at least one ship — why am I explaining this to you? DO YOUR JOB!” I shout, jabbing a finger into his chest hard enough he nearly stumbles backwards. “What are you waiting for, a kiss on the lips?! Get on with it!”

There’s a wave of hesitation that rolls through the room and I open my mouth to keep yelling until I get my way, but the shrill ring of a Transponder that isn’t the one in my hand sounds from across the way and everyone freezes.

Shit I didn’t think they’d have another one in here. I *really* hope this isn’t biting me in the ass.

The sound of the call connecting is loud over the silence, despite the fact the snail it originated from is pretty damn far away all things considered. “Hello?” the voice of the guard who answered it says shakily. “Yes. Yes. Uh, alright. Yes, of course, thank you. Um, just a moment please.”

The guard power walks away from the snail towards me and the guard I’ve been yelling at. “Uh. There actually is a ship? Approaching and requesting entrance? They said they’re aid and they have the proper codes, too,” he says anxiously, eyes darting between me and the other guy.

Girl when life gives you lemons, it gives you *fucking lemons.*

I round on the original guy with a sharp glower. “If I need to wait another fucking second for you to get on with it, there isn’t going to be enough antidote in this prison to save us all,” I hiss gravely.

The guard hesitates for a moment, then turns to his fellow technicians. “We have our orders, then! Open the Gates of Justice!” he commands.

I… I am god favourite and I am a genius and I am so fucking amazed at my own bullshit I could cry.

The room burst into a flurry of motion around us as people start flipping switches and calling things out, running to different machines like they have fires under their asses. I watch it happen for a long moment, just basking in my victory, before I turn back to the guy I've been berating since I arrived.

He flinches under my attention and his spine snaps straight. "I apologize for my shortness, understandably I'm quite stressed," I say calmly. He visibly does a hard reboot. "It was quite rude of me to take it out on you, and I'm deeply sorry for my behaviour. Your work in here is admirable and appreciated."

"Uh," he says stupidly. "Thank… thank you?"

So here's the thing. The room really doesn't have windows. So I'm gonna have to go back out into that fucking hall and find one.

I give him a sharp nod. "Of course. I must go check on the situation downstairs. Since your comms are clearly compromised, what with you not receiving the Chief's orders, I'd suggest you barricade the door behind me, no matter who tries to come in."

"Er — yes. Of course, sir," he squeaks, following sedately as I head for the door.

I give him a warm smile as I open it and step into the hall. "Thank you for all your efforts. Barricade the door now." He gets one more slow nod in before I shut it in his face. I listen for a moment until I hear the telltale sounds of furniture being pushed in front of the door, before turning back to the hall and deflating with a heavy wheeze of a sigh.

I cannot FUCKING BELIEVE I KEEP GETTING AWAY WITH THIS.

I sprint down the hall the opposite side I came from, shedding pieces of my disguise as I go and dropping the Transponder I surreptitiously took onto the ground. There fucking BETTER be a GODDAMN WINDOW up here or so help me god I am FUCKED.

There's a sound of… dude I can't even fucking *describe* this shit, there's just a sound of pure condenced *fury* behind me. I chance a glance back, and good fuCKING GOD GUESS WHAT?

IT'S MAGELLAN. IT'S GODDAMN MOTHERFUCKIGN MAGELLAN. AND GUESS WHAT HE'S DOING? *ROCKETING TOWARDS ME IN A CHARGE OF POISONLY DEADLY DOOM* ***OF DEATH.***

So yeah I scream at the top of my lungs and start running as fast as my legs can possibly carry me. I drift around a corner and nearly smash into the wall, genuinely only my pure unadulterated terror stops me from getting embedded in the stone, and the light of what can only be Christ him-fucking-self shines on me from the end of the hall.

A window. A singular, beautiful, *glassless* window that's basically just a hole through the stone with a view of the sea and sky. And the Gates of Justice and the fucking naval battle taking place right in front of it as it just begins to crack open.

Sweet mercy among mercies I'm actually going to do it. Holy fuck I'm gonna ***do it.***

"YOU!" an unearthly voice bellows from entirely too close behind me. I can hear the fizzling and hissing of caustic goo on stone as poison is flung around behind me, and the deafening thunder of furious footsteps falling like crashing lightning.

Almost there. *Almost there.*

I push myself beyond human limits. I push myself beyond the limits of possibility, probability, and Newton's Law of Acceleration.

I leap right through the open gap of a window — suspended in open air for a moment between time, between space and matter, between all that exists and all that could exist—

For a moment: I'm infinite, I'm everlasting.

It's never felt easier to reach — I don't even need to *reach,* I just *touch* — that feeling of spinning gears, vinyl records being flipped, planes shifting, pinwheel galaxies folding in on themselves; I touch that feeling and I turn this escape attempt into a successful jailbreak.

Rocketing sideways through gravity, the wind is so loud in my ears Magellan's enraged howl is all but lost on me. I cut a line through the air like a damn penny off the Empire State Building, limbs semi-flailing and eyes watering at the sting. I don't know what the fuck terminal velocity feels like, but I think I hit it.

It takes some ungraceful attempts at flipping and maneuvering, but I eventually manage to get my head where I can see where the Sam Hill I'm going. The ship — the only ship with enough colourful characters to be our escape ship, I mean — is approaching rapidly and I start putting everything I have into slowly my decent so I don't fucking die on impact.

With my gravity pulling various directions to kill my momentum without killing ME from stopping too fast, or god forbid too slow, the arc of my sideways freefall begins curving downwards until I'm reasonably sure I'm not in danger of immediate death.

That's about the time an icepick drives itself directly into my prefrontal cortex with a pain so sharp I nearly black out for a moment.

Scratch that, maybe I *do* black out, because when my brain stops fucking bluescreening I'm plummeting not in the careful curve for the deck, but just a little off from that.

Like into the water.

"SHHHHHHHHHHHIIIIIIIIIITTTTTTTTTT—"

I miss the deck by like ten metres. Ten *fucking* metres.

I'm ready to just accept my watery death at the hands of the sea. I made it this far, bitch at this point I deserve this. What the hell ever.

And then I don't. A shape bursts out of the water just under me and I get a second to think *fucking WHATEVER sure let me get eaten by a sea monster instead FUCKING SURE* before I'm caught out of my fall on the back of a—

You know what? I take another moment to appreciate the universe as a whole. It's a miracle I've survived this far, it's incredible that I exist and that I get to experience the things I experience, and I have so much love inside me for the world.

That being said, there is absolutely nothing that can top the feeling of being saved from drowning to death by being carried on the back of a whale shark. I've peaked. I'll never experience anything this amazing again.

I lay flat on my stomach, arms splayed as wide as they can as I try to give this glorious filter feeder the closest approximation of a hug I can accomplish. "This is the best day of my life," I whimper, closing my eyes to bask in the feeling.

Then a hand latches around my waist. My eyes snap back open.

"Oh no."

"EEEEEEEEEEDDDDDDDDDDDD!" my Captain screams in pure elation, and then I'm back to being airborne. I get maybe half a second of a view of the whale shark's big smile — good fucking god it looks so beatiful and kind — as I'm grappled from my glorious aquatic saviour up to the deck of the ship, where I'm promptly engulfed in a hug with such force my feet never even touch wood before I'm sprawling on the ground with him in tow.

"Ow," I give myself a moment to say, because *ow.*

Luffy's mouth is already going a mile a minute about how worried he was and how awesome his fight was and how sick riding the whale sharks was and how cool I was, and I just put my head down on his chest and take the first real breath I've gotten in like… a minute.

"Luf," I wheeze.

"Yeah?" he answers, barely taking a breath from his ranting.

"Jesus *Christ,"* I say adamantly.

"Fair enough!" he replies, and then my head goes woozy as he manhandles me back upright and places me on my feet. I nearly immediately fall over, so his hands aren't even off my arms for a second before one is slung over his shoulder in a move so practiced at this point it's embarrassing.

The other occupants of the boat are cheering uproariously around the sounds of cannon fire, and my head bobs as my hat is pressed onto my hair by a grinning Jimbei, and Iva and Inazuma are both here, and I spot Bon somewhere to my right and resolve to be elated by that in a moment, but—

We're passing through the Gate. It's open wide enough for two ships to pass through right now, something being taken advantage of by the Marine battleship pulling adjacent to us, poised like it's come from the direction we're headed.

The chaos of the naval battle fades to background noise, near silence. I'd swear I can hear the churn of the currents being pushed by the massive doors if that could be possible over the continued cannon fire. The ship hosts no Marines, but its primary passenger stares back at me all the same.

Blackbeard's unnatural toothy grin is like a spotlight with the intensity with which it's directed.

My skin crawls and coldness creeps in like a fine mist, I'm pinned by the piercing gaze of too many eyes. I go pinprick-numb everywhere, even the feeling of Luffy pressed flush to my side and his hand tightening on my waist becoming insensate.

A sick kind of understanding passes between us that tastes like animosity and hunger and overripe cherries. We both stare across the water and the knowledge that neither of us will, *can,* stop to fight, choked by tight deadlines.

The distance between our passing ships seems both infinitely distant and impossibly close.

He makes a half-gesture to his ear, mangled and half-obliterated right in line with an angry pink scar dug into his cheek, puckered and warped by his ever-present smile.

There are still no words exchanged. I hear them anyway.

It's a 'thank you for the gift,' it's a 'see? You left a mark on me,' it's a patronizing congratulations, it's a promise of return, it's a cited explanation for something that hasn't happened yet.

Have you seen this?

I feel heavy, heavy, heavy.

I keep all the anger and grief and fury and fear buried this time, face a careful blank to his disgusting facsimile of a smile. I can tell he sees it all the same.

The ships pass, cannon fire continues to rain down, the water swirls around us in frenzied patterns, and the *something* in human skin and clothes doesn't loosen its grip on my gaze the entire time.

Then we're in open sea with the Gate closed behind us.

Chapter End Notes

Haha. Ha.

Anywho how's that for a sendoff to the arc that Would Not Let Me Leave? I've been itching to write that little reunion for entirely too long, and the vibes for the last chunk of the chapter were so fun to kick around and fuck with.

And what's this??? Me yoinking Bon out of Impel Down despite any possible future plotholes it might make if Oda decides to make the fact that Bon is still chilling in Impel Down in canon important??? More likely than you think. We'll deal with that car when it hits us.

All my love to my fellow students being tossed ass first back into classes, may we not die horrific academic deaths, and all my love to everyone else as well. Shit guys I love y'all. Thanks for sticking around ♥

Chapter 127: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Seven: Pick Your Weapons Up And Throw Your Mercy Down

Chapter Summary

> *Mercy Down - Shayfer James*
>
> I snort a soundless burst of air into his bangs, my hand returning to his hair and sinking in to palm the curve of his skull. “Frankly, we don’t have the time for the kind of nap I need,” I respond with a humourless twitch of my lips.

Chapter Notes

> Y'ALL I ALMOST GOT MURDERED BY A BLUE HONDA CIVIC LAST WEEK WHAT KIND OF SICK ROLE REVERSAL IS THIS 😭😭😭 WHAT DOES THIS BITCHASS CAR MODEL HAVE AGAINST ME???
>
> Rip all my American readers and the Tiktok ban or whatever, app's already lonelier without y'all and there's a sudden surplus of Marianas Trench I dunno how to cope with, I'm sorry your government is such a flaming pile of shit :(For legal reasons I'd never suggest bricking windshields, but yaknow. When in precedented times.
>
> Anywho it's very cold here and school got me hustlin' again, but I had a Positive Social Interaction and I feel very accomplished about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> I’m numb to the celebration around me for an enduring moment in time as we ride the Tub Current in our stolen Marine Battleship.
>
> It seems like a fight to regain dominion of my body, a downright backstreet brawl to repossess command of my extremities. I don’t manage more than a jerking and unrhythmic clenching and relaxing of my fists for a minute as Luffy remains a white-hot beacon of pressure at my side. And even that pressure, that sure and indelible presence, took what felt like a lifetime to register against the static emptiness left by that… *thing*.

Somehow — somewhere between the full range of my hearing returning and the half-party migrating away from us — my hand finds its way to the hair at the back of Luffy's neck, slightly grown out and carrying the distinct texture of dried sweat, and twines my fingers through it.

I idly twist and lightly tug the strands, eyes tracing the vibrant blue line of the horizon. I don't make myself do anything more for the moment, even I can't be that cruel to myself.

"I hate him."

It's the bitterness that startles me. That, and the fact that the words don't spill unbidden from my own mouth — but from Luffy's.

My tunnel vision floats to rest on my Captain's face, on the rancorous furrow of his brow and the hollowness lurking behind the twist of his mouth. His gaze doesn't falter from that same spot that snared my own, and the triumph I felt falling through the open mouth of the window and sky is absent.

My hand slides from his salt encrusted hair to the hinge of his jaw, thumb pushing gently until his face is tilted towards me. His eyes drop somewhere below the bruised line of my throat, with something resentful and guilty pulling it down.

I wait, not quite patiently but without hurry or prompting, and it's a little bit because I don't know what words I need to use yet. Eventually he lifts his eyes with nothing but his own willpower, meeting mine with a whole palette of emotions starbursting behind them.

"I hate him," he repeats tightly, resolutely, "and I can't forgive this."

I feel every part of me quiet. I trace gentle shapes into the skin under his ear and relish the slow fan of his eyelashes. "He terrifies me," I croak around the mouthful of cherry pits lodged in my throat. The word isn't enough. It doesn't encompass *enough.*

Luffy's face hardens as his eyes soften. "And I *hate* him. He makes you scared and he took Ace and I *hate him."*

My chin dips forward without my consent and I have to close my eyes against the deep, stuttering breath that rattles through my battered lungs. A miles long laundry list of worries scrolls through my head at a speed that baffled me; Ace and if we'll make it on time, our crew and if they're coping well where they are, Jonah and if Blackbeard's presence means something for his safety, and the myriad of other people I've come to care so deeply for across the sea.

My eyes flicker back open when Luffy's forehead lands on my cheek, his hat being bumped down his back and getting caught on my hand.

"You need a nap. Or something," he mutters, half uncertain.

I snort a soundless burst of air into his bangs, my hand returning to his hair and sinking in to palm the curve of his skull. "Frankly, we don't have the time for the kind of nap I need," I respond with a humourless twitch of my lips.

His head slides until his cheek is resting more on my shoulder so he can narrow his eyes up at me. "We have time for you to get started. A lot happened to you," he shoots back pointedly.

"I'll have time to be traumatized later," I say dismissively.

Luffy frowns at me. "I don't think that's very healthy," he counters, unconvinced.

I playfully rap the knuckles of my spare hand onto his forehead. "Whadda *you* know?"

Luffy, very maturely, blows a raspberry at me. I just stare at him for a moment, and he stares back at me, and I feel the half smile I had managed with the teasing fold back into a flat, pensive look.

“This is gonna be hard, isn’t it?” he mumbles, eyes once again wandering to the horizon with an out of place expression of contemplation. “Gonna be bad.”

I let my face drop down. I sigh into his hair and turn my head to tuck a kiss into his temple, ignoring the variety of smells and substances he’s picked up through our prison escapade.

“Nothing’s easy with us,” I reply after a moment. “You’re a fighter, and I follow your lead. Things might always get hard, or bad, but you’re always gonna try, and I’m always gonna be following you, right? So fuck it if it’s gonna be hard. We’ll do it anyway.”

A smile graces Luffy’s mouth, eyes curving with adoring intent. “Every step of the way, no matter where it leads,” he murmurs before they realign with mine.

I beam gently at him. “As you wish, my liege,” I whisper, honeyed and tender.

The hand he’s had around my waist slides up and forward to spread across my side, all warm palm and long fingers, and presses softly to pull us impossibly closer together as the other wraps to rest just above it.

I drape my arm over the one with its hand still buried in his hair, and for a minute as the ship steadily rushes to Marineford, we just hold each other.

———

“You could love ICP,” I say once I’ve saddled up to Buggy, Luffy hopping off to bug someone or other.

He just sighs exasperatedly, fingers pinching the skin between his eyes. “For the last fucking time *I know,”* he groans, pauses for a second, then blinks down at me. “Oh god, you really *do* know him.”

I snort hard, the implication that Coin has absolutely been pushing this is fucking hilarious, and shrug half-heartedly. “Yeah, but I’m also from the same place as him so I know what I’m talking about.”

Buggy visibly has a MOMENT with that information. “I guess that makes sense,” he gets out in a strangled voice. “Everything is already going to shit, why *not* throw another Canadian at the problem? Who gives a damn!”

I throw my head back and laugh.

“What’s a Canadian?” a voice behind me asks, and I grin as I turn and see Bon approaching us.

“Benny!” I cheer, folding myself into the hug he immediately swoops in to give me.

“Eddie!” he cheers back, patting my head affectionately. God I’m SO fucking glad he’s here and in one piece.

“An *insane psychopath,* that’s what,” Buggy growls. “Like, what kind of island is Canada? Fuck if I know, but considering the people coming from it, it has to be some kind of post-apocalyptic *hellscape* the likes of which a mortal mind can’t comprehend.”

“Not far off,” I mutter thoughtfully, stroking my chin.

“All I’ve got is winter, Hockey, maple syrup, music, whatever TV is, whatever the fuck *Tiktok* is, pure unbridled LUNACY, and no means of return,” Buggy lists, ticking off his fingers and ending with his middle one hoisted rudely at me. “I still never got a straight answer on whether it’s a sky island or not!”

DAMN he has my number, summed my shit up with NO hesitation. “And you’re not getting one now!” I say cheerfully, then skip away from the group to head for the front deck.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH—” he screeches after me, but I just cackle my way up the stairs.

I come to a neat stop beside Jimbei at the wheel, smiling sunnily up at the amused look he shoots me. Crocodile scoffs from where he’s perched on top of a bigass cannon, staring down at everything and everyone with reproach. I wonder if anyone told him he’s allowed to stop being a dickhole from time to time?

“So I heard you wear lifts in your shoes,” I say conversationally, not dropping my smile in the least.

“WHO TOLD YOU THAT?!” Crocodile squawks, spine snapping straight from the relaxed position he was chilling in.

God I’m so good at this bonding with the in-laws thing.

He spends a good twenty seconds looking close to strangling me before he visibly tucks all his emotions back in and smooths down his shirt with a dirty glare, then turns his attention to Jimbei. “I knew being able to talk to fish is a unique ability of Fishmen, but to think you can call sharks, too,” Crocodile comments, gracefully ignoring me.

“The sharks were really fucking cool,” I state adamantly and with all due seriousness.

Jimbei gives me a smile, then faces Croc’s direction and raises an eyebrow. “Do you find it strange we get along with fish?”

His eyebrows twitch through several expressions, like the question put him on the wrong foot. “...Well, it’s certainly out of the ordinary,” he says snootily. “Guess that’s one reason your violent race is secluded.”

I lean around Jimbei to shoot him this disparaging, disappointed, slightly disgusted look. *"Dude* ? Shut the fuck up?" I suggest incredulously. "Have some *tact."*

Jimbei shakes his head a little, patting me gently on the shoulder with a huge webbed hand. "Your defense is appreciated, but unnecessary. I shall take it as a compliment. I cannot deny that Fishmen are indeed violent…"

"Doesn't mean shit like that has to be said," I mutter, glowering at where Crocodile is still sitting cool as a cucumber. "Use some fucking decorum, you ingrate."

Crocodile's face twists into something sour, mouth opening before a weight drops onto my back and Luffy's grinning face appears in my periphery. "I'm back!" he announces cheerfully.

"Ah, Luffy," Jimbei says, blinking down at the pair of us. "You've given me another chance to save Ace, I am forever in your debt," he says solemnly.

Luffy rolls his eyes with a smile. "Aw, come on! It's great you're coming along, you're strong as hell!"

"I would have cried if you didn't come," I state gravely.

Something seems to pass over Jiimbei's face before it settles into a determined smile. "I'm sure they've stripped my title of Warlord by now, but I intend to go all out at Marine Headquarters! As repayment for freeing me, I shall definitely rescue Ace!"

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!" Buggy screams from where he was climbing over the railing instead of coming up the stairs like a normal person.

"I knew he was a Warlord, right?" Luffy mutters into my ear.

“Probably? I talk about him a lot,” I mutter back.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY ‘MARINE HEADQUARTERS?’ ARE WE GOING TO MARINE HQ?!” Buggy shrieks at the top of his lungs. “YOU KNOW ABOUT THE IMPENDING WAR, RIGHT?! *RIGHT?!”*

“Huh? Marine HQ?” some of the other escaped prisoners start murmuring amongst themselves.

“Shut it. It’s your fault for being so stupid and slow,” Crocodile growls.

“WHAT WAS THAT?!” Buggy screeches back, seemingly forgetting that he was terrified of this guy like an hour or something ago.

“I find it pathetic you need an explanation on how this works,” Crocodile continues disparagingly. “The second we left that Gate we had only two destinations, Marineford or Enies Lobby. We broke out *specifically* because we had an interest in this war, you idiot.”

There’s a beat as the information sinks in, and then the yelling begins. Buggy goes flying for Jimbei, and I slap my hand up into his face so I can sharply twist his gravity and slam him into the ground before he can tackle the guy.

I frown disappointedly down at him while the crowd’s shouting stalls at the sudden drop of their ringleader. “Dude. No distracting the driver. Basic passenger etiquette, c’mon.”

Bugg leaps back to his feet and reaches out to grab at my collar, probably to throttle me, but Luffy bats his hands away. “ARE YOU CERTIFIABLE?! I AM *NOT* GOING TO GODDAMN FUCKING *MARINEFORD* AFTER ESCAPING PRISON! DO YOU THINK I’M AN IDIOT?!”

“Yeah, we do,” Luffy answers easily. “Get off if you don’t like where we’re going.”

“WE ***CAN’T*** *YOU DUMBASS!”* Buggy wails. “IF WE GET OFF, WE’RE DEAD!”

“This is exhausting,” I mutter into my hands.

The dull ring of a Transponder cuts through what remains of the noise, and suddenly Luffy has disappeared from my back and is right beside it, opening the compartment where it sits and answering it. “Hello? Whaddya want?”

I’m right beside him faster than you could blink. “Hi welcome to Chilis how may I take your order?” I say, breathing directly into the receiver.

“Marine Headquarters speaking,” a voice responds dryly.

“Hi, I’m Luffy,” my gorgeous idiot of a husband replies immediately.

“Don’t introduce yourself, you’re a pirate for god’s sake!” a bunch of people hiss behind us. I glare over my shoulder and shush them sharply. These rude ass bicthes should know better than to interrupt calls.

“If this is the escapees aboard that ship, you’re hearing a report from the Impel Down escort fleet. This is information we receive of the situation before communications ceased,” the Marine continues, voice flat and cold, entirely detached from the situation. “There are two forces masterminding this entire jailbreak!”

“Two?” someone behind us mumbles.

“Here we go,” I huff, quiet and irritated, crossing my arms and scowling at the indifferent face of the snail.

“The pirates Strawhat Luffy and his First Mate, the Detective of the Damned, and Buggy the Clown, also a pirate!” the guy announces dourly.

Buggy makes a choked noise behind us, and a wave of shock and awe ripples through the other crowded pirates.

“Serious? Captain Buggy got mentioned as a mastermind instead of the Warlords?” someone gapes.

“Who *are* you?!” another demands in incredulous wonder.

“Why me?!” Buggy squawks.

“Hand me the documents,” the Marine says, presumably aside to someone else with him.

“Yes, sir!” another voice acquiesces, briefly changing the stern face of the Transponder Snail.

“We didn’t take you seriously, thinking you were an average insignificant pirate,” the Marine continues distastefully, following the sound of shuffling papers. “But now we know who we’re dealing with, Buggy the Clown! You were aboard the Pirate King’s, Gold Roger’s, ship!”

“How the fuck do they know that?!” Buggy yelps, jaw dropping open.

“W — WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!” everyone around us screams.

“We also received information that you are like a brother to none other than an Emperor of the Sea, Red Hair Shanks!” the Marine continues, no fucks given.

“IS THIS GUY SERIOUS?!” a bunch of people shriek as Buggy’s face twists in derision at the claim, even in the midst of his panic.

“To think a man like you restrained himself from causing conspicuous incidents and kept a low profile for so long… but now you’ve shown your true colours!” Marine guy sneers. “We had no indication of a bond between you and Fire Fist Ace, but by teaming up with the Strawhats’, it’s evident that you too intend to rescue him!”

I wonder if it’s just a Grand Line thing to jump to conclusions like you’re playing a platformer? Seems to be a running theme.

“There are over 200 villains aboard your ship, including Jimbei, Crocodile and Ivankov, and now we’ve confirmed your approach!” he continues gravely. “Here’s a word of advice; since we will not possibly open the Gates of Justice for you, you cannot possibly reach Marineford. Additionally, you cannot break away from the Tub Current! You have nowhere to run, and you will in no way survive! That is all…”

“Hey wait, Marine guy!” Luffy interrupts the guy’s closing remarks. “I’M GONNA SAVE ACE NO MATTER WHAT!” he shouts down the receiver. “YOU JUST WAIT AND WATCH!”

His eyes flicker briefly over his shoulder at me, and I take my cue. I lean in way too close for this to do anything but earrape these suckers, and grin. “EAT SHIT, NERD!” I holler as loud as my poor fucked up throat can take, and then Luffy slams the receiver down and slaps the compartment it’s in shut.

“You should *not* be saying ‘just wait and watch,’ in a situation like this!” one of Iva’s people shrieks.

“You’re wanted men!” another screeches.

“Why’re they picking a fight with Marine HQ?!” a group of other escapees shout.

“But more importantly, Captain Buggy!” someone else cries, and then all the focus is on poor poor Buggy, who looks like his brain’s running commentary is just a 40 page document of nothing but the word ‘fuck’ in 11 point Arial.

“This is so bad,” he strangles out around the cheers and exclamations of the crowd around us. “From now on, the government is gonna be watching my every move..!”

“Oh, right!” Luffy ah’s, smacking his fist down into his palm. “The old First Mate guy said something about this!”

“First Mate..?!” Buggy needles, leaning in close to both of us.

“Yeah, Rayleigh! You know him, right?” Luffy responds.

“Hah?! You met Rayleigh?! How is he, is he doing well?! Wait, did you meet him when you met Coin, were they together?!” Buggy questions, panic momentarily abandoned for excitement.

“Different occasions,” I dismiss. “He’s chill though, man’s just living his life.”

“Captain Buggy, you’re truly a frightening man!” someone gasps in astonishment.

“No, no, hold on a minute!” Buggy squawks, frantically waving his hands. “My career as a pirate compared to these big shots is—”

“You’re amazing!” someone interrupts him enthusiastically. “Man, you were part of that legendary pirate crew!”

The people devolve into cheering and shouted questions, Buggy visibly goes through the five stages of grief, his expressions flicker and morph as he has another one of those internal dialogues with himself about god knows what.

I spot Iva's voluminous curls through the crowd, and decide that's a much better use of my time than paying any more attention to Buggy and his pack of sycophants probably organizing a mutiny or something.

"Eddie-baby!" they say cheerfully as I trot up to them. "Very dramatic entrance earlier, I must say I approve."

I snort. "Thanks, Iva. You alright? How's Inazuma?"

"He'll be alright," they reply with a dismissive wave of their hand. "Probably won't be up and about for the rest of this excursion, but should ultimately make a full recovery. And yourself?"

I copy their gesture. "I'm chill. Gonna feel like dogshit in a couple hours again, but for now I'm as good as I'm getting."

They make a high and commiserating sound, eyes flickering to where Buggy seems to have brought the crowd to tears with a speech or something, then training them back on me with a keen squint. "There something you need to get off your chest, Eddie-baby?"

I sigh and shake my head with a smile. "Damn, you read me pretty well. I'm assuming after this mess you'll be headed back to the Kamabakka Queendom?" I prompt.

"That I am," they respond easily. We both pause at the giant cheer that erupts through the ship before mutually deciding to ignore it.

"I'm pretty certain our friend Sanji is on Momoiro Island, if it's not too much trouble on you would you mind looking after him for us?" I ask with a grimace of a smile. "He's got a

couple… hang ups that location in particular might — how do I say this… *chafe."*

Iva hums in understanding, settling a gloved hand on my shoulder. "Don't you worry, Eddie-baby. Your Sanji-boy is in good hands," they promise with a wide grin. "We'll watch out for your boy, my candies are nothing if not hospitable!"

That's what I'm worried about, I don't say. I just laugh and shake my head again.

"Hey! What's that?!" one of Iva's people shouts from beside us, leaning over the rails and pointing out into the water. We both turn to see what they're pointing at, and Iva makes a dismayed sound.

The evidence of a shipwreck is scattered through the water, the floating remains of the ship nothing more than splinters and scrap. It doesn't seem like it was a very big ship, but the thing that stands out in the tattered flag still floating on the distant surface of the water, bearing the Revolutionary Army's crest.

"That must have been the force of phase two," I mutter under my breath, brow creasing at the destruction. "Guess they didn't have any luck against the transport fleet. *Fuck."* I wonder how many people were aboard that ship, how many of them died. I can't help but feel responsible.

Iva surveys the wreck for a moment, then me, then sighs. "I suppose they were trying to get Ace-boy before they reached Marineford too, hm? Then they fought bravely for a cause they had faith in, no need for your misplaced guilt," they say sternly.

I nod, and try to take that to heart.

"We should be coming up on the Gate any minute now, if you'd like to go below and raid their armoury I'd suggest doing that how," they say shrewdly, giving me a sidelong smirk.

Oh my god.

I feel my entire being light up and try my damndest to appear like a normal human being. “What a fabulous idea,” I agree, glancing around the crowd. If I want what I want I need to beat all these chucklefucks down there. “I’m gonna hit the privy, it’ll be really embarrassing if I die on the battlefield and my bowels release posthumously,” I declare loudly, spinning on my heel.

“Wait, does that actually happen?” someone yelps.

“Oh, yes, it’s quite sad,” I confirm lightly, not slowing in my steps at all. “I’d hate for my heroic legacy to be smeared by my body shitting itself after I’ve kicked it. That would be so very pathetic.”

I don’t think I need to elaborate on the sudden rush of people headed for bathrooms, leaving me a straight shot to the lower decks and their weapons stores.

I also don’t think I need to explain my return to the front of the ship with a fucking bazooka cannon in tow, because genuinely what the fuck where you expecting from me. Be honest with yourselves.

“Oooooh Ed, you got another cannon!” Luffy awes as I come to rest beside him, Jimbei at the wheel on his other side.

I beam and pat the bazooka fondly. “Naturally. These chucklefucks won’t stand a chance.”

“Should someone as small as you even be trusted with that much firepower?” Crocodile sneers from his perch.

“Is this guy even actually gonna help us?” someone mutters under their breath. “All he’s done is be mean and insult people. Why is he here if he’s just gonna be negative?”

I turn to face the grunt who said it directly, and he gulps when I meet his eyes. “Because *he,”* I jerk my thumb at Crocodile, “is only here to be a certified crashout, the proportions of which you couldn’t even *fathom.”*

“Was that an insult?” Crocodile himself mutters, sounding genuinely confused.

“It’s as close to a compliment you’re getting from me,” I correct. “Speaking of insults, did you know you got your title stripped for the exact reason Doflamingo got his?”

“What,” he says flatly, eyes flashing.

“Yup. Little hypocritical, but what were we expecting from the WG? You wanna kick his ass about it, preferably as far away from me as possible?” I suggest in a sweet tone.

Crocodile’s glower swivels to the front of the ship with a low, angry hum. “Perhaps.”

Jimbei glances between us before chuckling silently. “Firing up the troops?” he murmurs down to me.

I grin up at him. “Just providing a target, obviously.”

“Hey! Look, it’s the Gates!” Luffy suddenly gasps, tugging on my arm and pointing ahead. Indeed, the Gates to Marineford have come into view on the horizon, approaching rapidly and looming large even from this far. “Wow, that was fast!”

“Not as fast as it could have been if the winds were with us,” Jimbei hums, looking at them consideringly. “Now then, how do we plan on penetrating this barrier?”

I chuckle lowly, running my fingers over switches and grooves on my new weapon. “Don’t even worry about that,” I dismiss with a curling and wicked grin. I cock the bazooka and a

sharp motion, flashing the whites of my teeth at the people beside me. “Saddle up homos, we got a war to win.”

Chapter End Notes

Me, shaking with barely controlled emotions, every single change I get to write soft moments with Ed and Luffy: They love each other so much they love each other *so fucking much—*

And then Marineford was upon us. Fucken hell guys this is gonna be uuuuuuuuuuuuuuh *rough* but you're troopers, I believe you can cope through this. Hopefully. Ahahahah. Ahah. Ha. Don't shoot me please

Shiiiiiiiiiit gang I'm getting rawdogged by college in a most undignified manner, no chapter on Feb 2nd because I'm mostly dead and half dying ✌✌ We'll be back on the 16th for Marineford for real!!! Stay sexy forever and keep your hope ♥♥♥

Chapter 128: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Eight: Like You've Never Lost A War

Chapter Summary

Crying Lightning - Arctic Monkeys

"Crazy competition for the title of god's favourite little asshole up in this bitch," I mutter bemusedly, shaking my head at the display.

Chapter Notes

DAMN BITCH WE'RE SO BACK!!! This is my last week of classes before reading week and istg if I don't catch up on writing with that week I'm going nuclear.

Anyway the snow here has been a fucking nightmare and also the state of the world is a fucking nightmare and it's never been a better time to listen to Good Luck Everybody by AJJ but ignore all that it's SSSBMTY TIME BAYBE!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you really not have a more articulate plan than 'don't worry?'" Crocodile asks dryly as we get closer and closer to the enormous Gates of Justice.

"Crocy, my man, you're really harshing my vibe," I say breezily. If I had a cocktail with a little umbrella in it I would be sipping that bitch good right about now. "Let what happens happen."

"I don't know if you've looked in a mirror lately, but nothing about your appearance inspires confidence. Goofy smile or no," he grunts.

"That's rude," I say shortly, staring forward resolutely with my nose turned up and goofy smile firmly in place. "In the words of a truly inspired individual; as the shit fucketh."

Crocodile mutters something like ‘your funeral’ under his breath, which I staunchly ignore.

“Really though, is your only solution to stand here and pray they open?” Buggy questions, disquieted and edged with indignant hysteria where he’s standing at the bow of the ship. “You just gonna throw your arms out and yell ‘OPEN SESAME?!’” he hollers, arms spread and doing just that.

The Gates creak open.

Everyone turns to Buggy. Buggy blinks eyes wide as saucers and slowly lowers his arms. “What the *fuck?”* he whines high in his throat.

“You truly are a prophet of god!” one of the escapees wails, throwing himself prostrated at Buggy’s feet, with a horde of others joining him.

“Crazy competition for the title of god’s favourite little asshole up in this bitch,” I mutter bemusedly, shaking my head at the display.

“You don’t say,” Jimbei chuckles a little exasperatedly as we sail smoothly through the small gap of the doors. “I hope the irony of them calling him a prophet when this was your prediction is not lost on you.”

“Eh. I’ve been hogging the prophet spotlight for long enough, it’ll do my ego some good to share,” I dismiss with a wave of my hand as the doors immediately start swinging back closed before we’ve even properly cleared them.

“Whatever you say,” Jimbei hums with a smile and a head shake.

“Anyway, I did want to ask—” I cut myself off and pause, staring down at the deck as it seems to shudder with the dull tremor of a distance vibration. “Did anyone else feel that.”

Jimbei looks out at the front of the ship and frowns. “Indeed,” he confirms. “Seismic activity, if I had to hazard a guess.”

“What’s Mike say about activity?” Luffy asks confusedly.

“I — no,” I sigh, completely unable to turn off my fond smile. “Earthquake and/or tsunami. The Big Shakes™.” Luffy ahhh’s in understanding.

“More than likely courtesy of Whitebeard,” Jimbei states evenly. “It would seem the climactic battle has started without us.” He narrows his eyes at the foggy horizon all around us, then glances back at me and Luffy. “And a tsunami isn’t out of the question. Things may get a little… bumpy.”

Me and Luffy both take simultaneous half-steps towards each other.

“When we drop in there we’re gonna drop hard and we’re gonna drop fast, it’s for the best we come out swinging,” I advise, a little nervous about the incoming natural disaster. Disast*ers*.

Jimbei and Luffy both nod along, but Crocodile turns with a frown and Buggy shunts his head above his adoring crowd. “Wait, drop?” they both ask trepidatiously. Except where Croc is annoyed, Buggy holds the fear of a man subjected to this brand of bullfuckery one too many times.

I open my mouth to answer, and that’s when the fear on Buggy’s face morphs into unadulterated horror as he beholds something behind us. “Holy mother of maggots—”

Everyone turns in unison.

“Oh *hell* no,” I deadpan.

The giant goddamn tsunami wave picks us up without further deliberation.

There's what I wanna call at least four minutes straight of non-stop hysterical screaming aboard; some from me, some from the prisoners and sycophants, mostly from Buggy. Luffy is clinging tight to me and I'm clinging tight to my cannon — I am NOT losing another one of these babies off the side of an airborne ship, thank you very much.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW, BUT THIS IS YOUR FAULT!" Buggy screeches, flat on his stomach and pointing an incensed finger at me.

"IT'S REALLY NOT!" I holler back, the string of my hat between my teeth to keep it from flying away.

"IS ANYONE ELSE COLD?" Luffy asks, way too loud for being directly in my ear.

"LUFFY, VOLUME," I berate. "WAIT, COLD—?"

The boat comes to a sudden and jarring stop as the frothing peak of the wave freezes in place, stray mist spraying over us in the form of snow-like frost. Me, Luffy, and a vast majority of the ship's occupants are thrown off our feet as we lose our momentum without warning.

My cannon goes directly into my liver as I topple over onto it, and the organ somehow manages to fire the damn thing because of fucking course it does.

The cannonball nearly takes Buggy's nose off before blasting through the railing at the bow and disappearing over the icy crest of the tsunami.

There's a tense moment of silence before Buggy is on his feet and wailing with his hands over his nose and another round of panicked shrieking starts.

"Oops," I say, rolling on top of Luffy to avoid a repeat action, "my bad."

“YOUR BAD?!” Buggy repeats, rounding on me furiously. *“YOUR BAD?!* YOU NEARLY TOOK MY FACE OFF!” he shouts, pointing to a section of his nose a brighter shade of red than the rest.

“That doesn’t sound like something I would do,” I deny immediately and without hesitation, recocking my cannon. Godbless this bullshit multishot Marine weaponry.

“YOOOOOOOU—”

“Holy hell we’re high up!” Luffy gapes, standing at the front of the ship (dragging me with him, the little fucker) and staring down. I peek my head over next to his and whistle at the distance between us and the ground.

And goddamn is it a long way down. Still, below us the crescent shape of Marineford has never been closer. There’s a smattering of ships, Marine and the more colourful and odd pirate variety — including the cross-shaped Moby Dick, which is exactly as awesome as you’d think it is — and the people are more comparable to a moving swarm of ants than individuals. I mean, we can clearly see the felled body of Oars Jr. because he’s goddamn massive, but I hold my point.

“Well would you look at that,” Crocodile mutters, standing on the railing beside us.

“Old man!” Jimbei exclaims, either able to pick him out with way better eyesight than I have, or just assuming he’s aboard the Moby Dick.

“It seems the war really is underway!” Iva states gravely.

“Alright, listen up! I’ve got an idea that’ll get us out of this!” Luffy announces, turning to address the ship at large. “We can’t let this stop us when we’ve got this far! We’ve only got three hours ‘till Ace’s execution!”

“Oh great, here we go,” Buggy groans. Wait then the hell did he change clothes?

“We’re gonna slide down the wave in the ship right into the fight!” Luffy declares confidently.

I lean closer to him and fake cough into my fist. “Wave’s facing the wrong way.”

“And we’ll have to drive backwards once we land so we don’t waste time turning around!” he adds without missing a beat.

“WHAT?! ARE YOU STUPID?!” Buggy screams.

“It’s our best shot! We just need to get the ship unstuck from the ice!” Luffy proclaims, arms out like he’s telling them to wait for it.

I stare down into the battlefield, then turn and frown down the length of the ship. I heave a sigh and take a moment to shore myself up. “Alright,” I say, resigned and a bit begrudging. “Hold onto your asses and possibly mine, this is gonna get rough.”

“Are you out of your damn mind?! This is a battleship! How would we possibly move it?!” Mr. 3 shrieks and *wow* I forgot this guy was here.

“If we work together we can do it!” Luffy says, brazen and determined.

“I… I suddenly feel like I can do this!” Buggy breathes maniacally, fists clenched and eyes wild.

These fucking people and their ability to motivate people, *god.*

“Yeah! We have Captain Buggy, the man who’s going to rule the world, on our side!” his sycophants cheer.

And then the Transponder rings.

“Calling all ships and troops! Objective TOTT2! Change positions and prepare for general strategy 3! Preparations are to be executed flawlessly!” a voice barks through the snail.

“It’s a Marine strategy communication,” someone murmurs.

“I didn’t really get any of the code words,” another person mumbles.

“Wait do those things connect automatically?” I ask confusedly.

“Once preparations are made, we will be executing Ace in advance of the expected time!” the voice finishes, and then the transmission finishes with a distinctive click.

There’s a second of silence so thick you could hear a pin drop all the way down on the execution stand.

“WE GOTTA HURRY!” everyone screams at once, the stronger of them rearing back and fucking *cranking it.*

The hindbrain instinct that screams giant-ice-breaking-noises-are-EVIL goes into overdrive as the top of the wave cracks under the sudden burst of power, and I’m not loving that in any facet of the word.

There’s a split second before the ship drops without anything to support it where I lift my miserable face to the sky. “This is gonna *suck,* isn’t it?”

Yeah, it sucks.

The first .5 seconds of the fall are hysteria: screaming, crying, flailing and falling. The second .5 seconds have me and Luffy meeting eyes as his incredible ass realizes what I want to do. The third .5 seconds have me shoving my cannon into Luffy's hands as he wraps one arm tight around my waist.

The fourth .5 seconds: this.

I slap myself across the face and plant my slipping feet on the surface of the ship. "HIT THE DECK IF YOU WANNA LIVE — I'M PULLING THE 'FUCK OFF I WIN' CARD!" I shout at the top of my lungs, and nearly the entire makeshift crew comply at once and without hesitation.

Right so remember how I'm super exhausted and also really hurt and also have definitely overused my powers over the course of this incredibly exhausting …48 hours? Oh wow holy shit wait has it even been that long? Jesus fuck I'm gonna need a word with my lawyers about maximum work hours on set and the violation of my OHSA rights.

Ignoring that. Anyway remember all that and also the fact that I'm a spiteful, stubborn, Sherlockin' poppin' badass with no regard for my personal limits?

The boat barely tips forward to dump us all headfirst into the rapidly approaching icefield in place of the Marineford bay when I wrench it back upright with nothing but tenacity and the kind of admonishment you'd give a dog who ate too much grass.

"If you want me steering this bitch, speak now or forever hold your peace!" I grit around my teeth, the vague taste of metal fizzling over my tongue and literally all of the veins in my body ticking in effort as I maneuver this stupid fucking ship's centre of gravity around like a joystick to keep it level from the wild circles it wants to spin out into.

"HOLY FUCK YOU'RE AMAZING!" one of the former prisoners yells.

“We’re listing to the left!” Jimbei calls helpfully. I correct accordingly. “Er — no, a little too far? About 4º to the right!”

This is so much harder than it needs to be.

“Someone just tell me if we’re set to flatten anything important!” I demand, wrists beginning to ache something fierce as my shoulders start trembling in tune with my knees. Not to mention my fucking *head.*

“Does a Marine battleship count as important?!” Buggy squalls, hugging a rail for dear life and looking a little green in the face.

“PERFECT!” I cackle.

“Wait you’re not aiming for open water?!” someone yelps.

“That ship is getting reAL CLOSE YOU GUYS—” another person screeches.

“You’re gonna want to bend your knees!” I suggest gleefully.

“OHMYGOD *BRACE FOR IT—!”*

We smash into the ship, flattening that bitch like a pizza crust.

Actually, we land squarely on the front half of the other boat and the damn thing cracks in half like a walnut shell. So we *do* flatten part of it, but the other half just goes flying up into the air like a toddler flung by someone’s vindictive dad dropping onto the seesaw with a running jump. The screams of the poor schmucks aboard fade out as they’re shunted high above us in a move entirely opposed to the laws of physics.

Anyway. The explosion of water and boat debris is immense, and the only reason I don't go flying ass over teakettle as we impact is Luffy's arm around me. As it is, there's a pause as the shock of a ship falling out of the sky registers and the wall of displaced water subsides back into the bay, and then we spot the scaffolding and execution platform.

I also, with a great deal of humor and disbelief, notice a cannonball lodged firmly into one of the legs of the stand. Hah. Oops.

"LUFFY! ED!" Ace's voice rings out across the island, hoarse and fucking *wrecked* with desperation and disbelief.

"ACE!" Luffy hollers with a giant grin. "WE FINALLY FOUND YOU!"

"HEY BABYGIRL, WE CAME TO PICK YOU UP!" I add with a manic laugh.

"We're here to save you! GYAHAHAHA ARE YOU READY FOR ME WORLD?!" Buggy giggles like a fucking weirdo, arms spread to soak up attention.

Oh my god we're having a full on Avengers assemble moment right now, cool poses and everything.

"GARP IS THAT YOUR FUCKING FAMILY AGAIN?!" a voice I assume is Sengoku demands lividly.

"LUFFY!" Garp wheezes like he cannot fucking believe what the world is coming to, which is entirely unwarranted, considering. Like literally what else did this man think would happen. Open your crusty old man eyes.

There's screams and shouts and an abundance of shock all across the battlefield from all kinds of characters. Warlords, Admirals, corpsmen, pirates, it's just a lot of yelling to be honest.

“So this is your answer then, Jimbei?!” Sengoku hollers accusingly.

Jimbei straightens to his full height and squares his shoulders. “Indeed! Consider this my official resignation as a Warlord!”

“You can join the pirate GSA instead, if you want,” I offer benevolently.

A hat lands on the deck in front of our little group of powerhouses. We all look at it, then look up.

“Ah fuck.”

The back half of the Marine battleship we had thrown into the air with our landing comes crashing back down onto the middle of *our* Marine battleship, hitting the left side and smashing a crater through the damn thing, tossing screaming Marines across the deck and somehow by the grace of god managing to miss every single escapee on board.

“Good lord,” I mutter exhaustedly.

“This is all your fault, and I know exactly how this time,” Buggy seethes.

Really, it’s a testament to their training how fast the Marines get their bearings and supposedly resign themselves to their fates, because suddenly the ship is engulfed in a full on brawl.

“How many fucking people were on that ship?!” Mr. 3 shrieks as, frankly, *way* too many dudes are now bum rushing us. And genuinely *yeah, what?* Half the fuckers aboard the ship are *actively drowning,* and there’s still enough guys that we’re forced into action which is *ridiculous.*

“Fine, COME GET SOME!” I holler, hoisting my cannon and unloading into the closest guy. I swing around and clobber some poor fuck across the face with the barrel, then slam the end into another’s face as I cock it again.

Y’all. *Y’all.*

The second I begin shooting it, some brave IDIOT tries for a grapple tackle on — I have no idea if the moron was aiming for me, the cannon, or my fucking hands — but what he succeeds at is loosening my grip enough that when it fires, it goes blasting out of my hands. Taking both the guy and another two people it hits on its short but magnificent trip across the ship over the side of the deck and into freezing waters.

I stare dumbfounded for a moment. Then I LOSE it. “Are you fucking KIDDING ME?! WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN *EVERY FUCKING TIME?!* WHO’S DIVINE PROCLAMATION WAS WASTED ON THIS BULLSHITTERY?!” I scream apoplectically into the sky.

An arm flings past my face as Luffy punches out a guy sneaking up on me. “Ed, focus!” he calls, posting up at my back as more of them just keep coming. I’m not mad. I’m *not.*

I slam my fist into a Marines’ head so hard he crumples to the ground. “WORLDSTAR!”

Buggy makes a scream of anguish behind me. “OH MY GOD YOU’RE *JUST LIKE HIM—”*

Haha. Nice. “Hey Bugs Bunny I have a suggestion,” I say, swapping places with Luffy and ducking under some guy’s rifle to kick him in the gut.

“Oh HELL no, do NOT call me that!” he shrieks back.

“Fine, Buggaroonie,” I concede.

“Yooooooou—!” he growls, grabbing a guy and tossing him right at me. Me and Luffy sidestep the flailing and screaming Marine, plucking his rifle right out of his hands as he goes. I fire it into the crowd a couple times before it either jams or runs out of ammo, then shrug and throw it like a javelin.

I turn and point to Buggy. “You. Your two jobs here are to cause as much chaos as possible, and to keep those goddamn snails rolling no matter what.”

His face twists in confusion as his eyes dart around the battlefield, eventually snagging on one of the Visual Transponders around the area. “Wha — are they *live streaming this?!* Now that’s just *distasteful.”*

“Agreed!” I start brightly, then let my face flatten out as I toss a man overboard. “Keep it going.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” he grumbles, but doesn’t argue further.

I huff and put another two guys down by using one as a bowling pin. “You know, I really don’t appreciate not being invited to this make-your-own New Years celebration,” I grunt. “It’s the start of a new era and they didn’t even have the consideration to call.”

“Maybe they didn’t want the disruption,” Jimbei says as he yanks a massive wave over the side of the ship, washing a mob of enemies right off. Good god, are there more than there were before? Where are these people *coming* from?

“Yeah ok fair enough,” I sigh. “We *do* have a tendency to take things off the rails.”

It hits me for a second that that’s really true. We’re disruptions and we’re disturbances and we actively mess everything up for the powers that be everywhere we go. We do that. *I* do that.

My Captain's back presses into mine and we're switching spots again as I finally pull my pistols out, blasting a ray of fire into the guys Luffy didn't want to deal with. My Captain, the harbinger of change.

And things *are* changing. Things *are* different. No matter how similar they seem, they aren't *the same.* And that's on *me.*

For a moment I let that thought sit with me. I'm changing things.

I think about the fuckery on Thriller Bark, and Kuma, and about the Supernovas, and being beside Luffy through almost all of Impel Down. I think about Sabo somewhere on this island, and about Jonah wherever he is, and Blackbeard meeting us at the Gates.

I think about Ace knowing both of his brothers are alive at this moment, and about being here at all.

I think back to the beginning of my journey, my efforts to not change anything, my hesitance in derailing us. I think about my resolve to be honest if asked. I think about my failure to change things, too. I think about my best efforts to keep us away from exactly this circumstance, and my inability to do so.

I think about Coin. I think about Coin and Pontiac and being deep underwater and beating him at every game we played. I think about his resigned acceptance at not being able to do anything, about him being punished for trying, about him trying anyway. About everything he's managed to do for me regardless.

I think about the couple things he could have been very selfish about. I think about not knowing what they are.

And I think about how *I'm changing things.*

I'm changing things for Coin — for the man who could have been selfish, for the man who stayed behind in a world without his Captain to wait for me, for the man still waiting for me all the way out in the Calm Belt.

I'm changing things for my predecessor, for *myself,* for my glowing idol of a Captain, and for the boy waiting up in the scaffolding with a metaphorical gun to his head and two literal swords to his neck.

I come full circle back to thinking on my initial attempts not to fuck up the plot. About not wanting to alter anyone's character development and not wanting to take away from who they are by being what I am, about wanting to stay useful.

I think about Zoro and Usopp specifically, in the shitshow leading up to Enies Lobby, and the full devotion to being First Mate and a comment said in anger purely to hurt before an apology. And of course Thriller Bark again, and holding Zoro's hand while sharing in a responsibility he didn't push me away from.

I think about everyone telling me things and helping me and just how much I love my crew, every inch the characters of One Piece but also so much more.

And finally, I think of Luffy making tough decisions all the way through Sabaody. Over and over again *thinking* about the problems I presented to him, and his choice to wait for the New World, and to run from Kuma, and to wait for me on Amazon Lily.

I think about my only exception to my original rule; about the words 'I will save Portgas D. Ace no matter what.'

And so, basically:

"FUCK CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT!" I roar, spinning my gun around to pistol whip another poor Marine across the face.

“What are they even saying?!” another one screams from my left. He gets hit next.

Fuck the rule, *fuck* not derailing things, ***fuck*** fate and ***FUCK*** the horse it rode in on.

“Ed, why is your face doing that?” Luffy asks with a slightly nervous chuckle, clearing us a little space with a wide sweeping spin of his arm.

I round on him with a smile made of pure glee and off-the-rails enthusiasm. “Nothing matters and I have free will!” I cry joyously.

“Er — cool? Great! What?” he responds, looking both supportive and confused.

I spread my arms wide and grin like a maniac. “If something was going to stop me, it’d have stopped me by now! I’m functioning beyond the guidelines my forebearer was confined to!”

“Picked a hell of a time to be tipping over into god complex territory!” Crocodile snarls from where he’s occupied with obliterating nearly all the guys on the back half of the ship. “You couldn’t have had these delusions of grandeur an hour from now?!”

“I’m no god and I’m not delusional!” I announce victoriously. “I’m contemplating the merits of absurdism and ready to shun life’s predetermined path for something better! I REJECT YOUR REALITY AND I SUBSTITUTE MY OWN!”

“Oh my god no, they’re having a mental breakdown,” Buggy moans wretchedly.

“It’s not a mental breakdown!” I shout to the heavens, snagging the last Marine on the ship by the shirt and giving his terrified ass a feral smile. “I hope you fucks are prepared for deliverance, because I’m about to bring you some!”

I hurl him out into the sea and turn to point at the scaffolding housing Ace, Garp and Sengoku.

“Pucker up Marineford, it’s time to kiss the face of god!”

Chapter End Notes

Ed decided they could do anything and promptly decided to go batshit insane. My hero.

Hey if you're in Ontario go register to vote in the provincial election and do your civic duty or whatever. I don't want Doug Ford around anymore the fucker looks like the crab thing from Monsters Inc. and it freaks me out he's gotta GO. (I apologize for bringing up politics and for everyone not in Ontario who has no fucking clue what I'm talking about lmao love y'all.)

WE'RE IN IT NOW FUCKERS FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS HARDER AND HOLD THE FUCK ON!!! I'm currently tentatively estimating another 13 chapters in this first leg of our journey, and I'll update the official chapter count of the fic when I nail that down for sure. *Wow* how can that number feel both so fucking big and so fucking small. SCARY.

Chapter 129: Chapter One Hundred and Twenty Nine: I Heard My Brother Crying Out

Chapter Summary

Neon Brother - Nothing But Thieves

I do, of course, end up in a handstand on the deck of the Moby Dick, because that's the kind of world we're living in.

Chapter Notes

Ok let me be so fucking clear I had half this chapter done during the front half of this week and then I found out one of my profs made an assignment due THE FUCKING SATURDAY OF READING WEEK??? WHO DOES THAT??? So maybe this took longer than I wanted it to.

In my defense, I think it fucks so hopefully the wait was worth it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're so funny, Ed!" Luffy laughs, throwing his head back.

"There's something so genuinely wrong with you," Buggy whines into his hands.

"You all say the sweetest things to me," I sniff with faux emotionalness in our second of peace following clearing the ship of attackers.

"I'm not even going to pretend I understood a word of what you just said," Iva says brightly. "Hey, where'd Croco-boy go—?"

I give you ONE FUCKING GUESS where Croco-boy went. The fucking SECOND we aren't in active combat and his sneaky little ass is off doing the ONE THING he was asked not to,

WHO COULD HAVE SEEN THAT ONE COMING?

I growl under my breath and start shaking my fist before we've even turned to look where he's gone. "That conniving, back-stabbing, salty, bitchless ass eater Luffy what are you doing oH *SHIT—"*

One guess what Luffy did. Here's a hint, it rhymes with 'shmabbed me and threw the both of us after Crocodile with the fury and precision of a squirrel,' and it has nothing to do with stabbing. That's right, wow, how'd you guess that? Incredible of you, truly.

In the maybe uuuuuuuuuh three/four seconds we're airborne over open water and the rails of the Moby Dick, I have the voice of Coin — so crisp and clear one of those seconds is wasted pondering if Coin is unhinged enough to be able to speak directly into my head — echoing a snippet of his parting words on Amazon Lily

"—and remember to ask for permission to board before your boots touch deck on Newgate's ship—"

Well. Uh, fuck.

Girl fuck what I just said about ignoring the rules and fate or whatever, it's one thing to spit in the face of god and an entire other to spit in the face of fucking *Whitebeard* over some goddamn pirate etiquette or whatever. Girlie I don't wanna *die.* Hey wait a minute is this some Laws of the Sea type shit?

Either way, *fuck.*

Luffy moves to smash foot first — Gear 2 and water-soaked — into Crocodile's face, and I make a decision.

"PERMISSION TO BOAAAAAAAAARD—" I scream at the top of my lungs as we nail right into the treacherous reptile.

I am willing to do everything in my power to keep my feet off the deck, including but not limited to yanking around my gravity and doing a handstand. We're already falling for the deck and I'm ready to crack my skull open to keep my metaphorical boots up because I fucking *listen* to Coin when he tells me shit.

I do, of course, end up in a handstand on the deck of the Moby Dick, because that's the kind of world we're living in.

There's a pause as Crocodile skitters back with a scowl and a hiss, and Luffy is mostly suspended in the air where I caught him on one of my legs before he could reach wood, and Whitebeard is just kinda staring down at us, then—

"Granted," he grunts.

I heave a sigh of relief and put my feet down on the deck. "Oh thank god."

"We had an arrangement, didn't we? Why are you defending Whitebeard?" Crocodile growls like he isn't being a massive hypocrite.

"You're being a hypoglycemic!" Luffy snaps back immediately.

"Yeah, you fuckin' hypocrite!" I echo, jabbing a finger at him before pausing to spare Luffy a look. "Wait where the fuck did you hear about hypoglycemia?"

"Chopper," Luffy answers easily before we both turn back to Croc with matching glares. "So this is really Whitebeard, huh? Then you're not touching him! Ace really cares about this guy!"

"And we *did* have an arrangement, you gritty fish-vomit scaly-ass guttersnipe! What did I tell you?!" I yell scoldingly. "One rule — ONE! And it wasn't even 'never fight that old man

again,' it was just 'hold off assaulting that senior citizen until the afterparty!'" I stall for a second once I've finished before nervously glancing over my shoulder at Whitebeard. "Uh, no offence, sir," I add belatedly.

He just kinda… raises an eyebrow at me.

Right. Cool. I turn back to Crocodile. "AND I let you join my pirate GSA, you fuckin' — you fuckin' — you fuckin' *hobknocker!"*

I'm running out of goddamn material.

"Oh my god *no,"* someone whispers in horror off to the side. Then there's a bunch of people sweeping in and boxing Croc in with swords and shit.

"YOU'RE STILL ENROLLED IN THE BOOK CLUB! I'LL FIND YOU, FUCKER, NO MATTER WHERE YOU RUN AND HIDE!" I holler as an afterthought. Croc makes a delightful squawk of outrage.

That's officially NOT my problem anymore, so I just flip him the bird and turn to my Captain. "Call me crazy, but I think we've had the 'no grabbing me and jumping at people' conversation before."

"You never mean it, though," Luffy says, bright and dismissive. Little shit.

"Boy, that straw hat you wear…" Whitebeard rumbles behind us. We both slowly turn to look up at the towering man. Jesus fucking *Christ he's so* ***fucking tall.*** Like *over 20 fucking* ***feet tall.*** "It bears a striking resemblance to the hat Red Hair once wore…"

Luffy blinks twice before glancing down at where his hat is resting against his back. "Oh! You know Shanks, huh? Yeah, I'm borrowing this from him!"

“Are you here to save your brother?” he inquires evenly, shifting his fuck-off huge naginata (Murakumogiri..? I think???) in his hand.

“That’s right!” Luffy replies without pause.

“I hope you understand who you’re up against,” he says, low and reproachful. “A squirt like you’ll be dead before you hit the scaffolding!”

Luffy’s determined expression shifts as he sets his jaw and his nose screws up.

Ooooh boy here we go. So much for my attempts at pirate etiquette, what a wasted effort if he’s gonna be impertinent regardless.

“Shut up! It’s not your job to decide that!” he shouts back in defiance without a lick of hesitation. “Everyone seems to think you’re gonna be the King of the Pirates, right?! Well the one who’s gonna be King of the Pirates is *me!”*

I lift resigned eyes to the sky in the beat of silence as a palpable wave of shock and indignation spreads like wildfire. Whitebeard’s eyes flash as the end of his naginata meets the deck in a loud clang, and there’s a tense moment as he and my Captain maintain intense eye contact while I just kinda stand there sweating and making faces.

Then Whitebeard smiles. “Well I’ll be damned,” he chuckles amusedly, turning back towards the battlefield. “You’d better not get in my way, greenhorn!” he laughs loudly, voice awash in good humor.

“I’ll do whatever I damn well want! I’m saving Ace myself!” Luffy retorts, turning his teeth-bearing grin forward as well.

All’s well that ends well I guess?

Luffy glances back at me with a complicated series of facial expressions and twitches that roughly translate to ‘tell the big guy about whatever the hell it was we know, also I’m going ahead, also I’m pointedly not grabbing you and dragging you with me, also I’m expecting you to catch up sooner or later.’

I roll my eyes and give him a half-assed salute. “Aye aye, Captain,” I say sardonically. “Off you go.”

“Ed’s gonna tell you important things because we all want to save Ace!” he tosses back at Whitebeard. “Ok bye!”

He delays just long enough to reach out and bonk our heads together, and then he’s off leaping over the side of the ship towards the harbour and the edge of the bay where the fighting is happening. “I’M COMING ACE!” he bellows as he goes.
“AAAHHHHHHHH!”

I love that man.

Anyway I turn to Whitebeard and pointedly ignore the eyebrow he pointedly raises at me. “While we were on that ship I so expertly flew into the ground we overheard a Marine transmission,” I start evenly. “They were using a bunch of fuckass codewords, but the gist is they’re moving Ace’s execution up.”

He looks down at me with his mouth twisted into a frown under his crescent mustache. “You’re sure that’s what they said?!”

I furrow my brow at him and scrunch my nose. “Why else would I be telling you? Anywho there’s these fuckass wall things in the bay here that’ll trap you inside, I’m assuming that’s what general strategy 3 is, which is a spectacularly pathetic name,” I continue.

“Yes, we’ve heard something about a… Popeye..? And natural disasters,” Whitebeard states. I die a little inside.

“Pompeii, *Pompeii,”* I whine desperately. “And you’ve heard from Sabo, fantastic. So Aokiji’ll freeze everything in place, then Akainu is gonna rain hellfire. You got a counter for that?”

“We’ve planned something,” he grants.

“Great, sick. This ship is fucking awesome, I’d shed a tear if she died,” I hum. And I mean that, the fucking goofy smile on the whale heads that make up the front of the decks? Goddamn adorable. This ship is *awesome.*

Whitebeard barks out a laugh. “I’m sure she appreciates you looking out for her! This is important information indeed… Please extend my apologies to your Captain. So you’re the strategist Sabo mentioned, are you?”

“Detective, actually, but I’ll take strategist,” I agree with a shrug. “Hey, you ever thought of putting Diamond Jozu up against Kizaru to see if he’ll get punted to the other side of the Grand Line with a slick redirect of his dumbass light movement shit?”

Another laugh seems to jump out of his mouth before he can think to stifle it. “Certainly something to consider!”

“It’s that or fight him in full armour shiny enough to blind and do your makeup with,” I say with a handwave. I pause again. “Sir,” I tact on half-heartedly.

“You’re a funny one,” he rumbles, I think approvingly? “At the very least a might more respectful than that Captain of yours. Quite the group, this era is being passed to.”

I side-eye Whitebeard, watching his eyes as they track Luffy across the battlefield. “From one Ed to another; you’re not planning on making it out of here alive, are you?” I murmur below my breath.

Whitebeard pauses. His eyes swivel to me. He *laughs*.

“You must be Coin’s kid. No. This battle will be my last,” he says with certainty. It doesn’t feel like he says it quietly, his voice feels like bass playing in the backseat of a car, but the people around us do not react to his words.

I take a deep breath, eyes briefly closing before I meet his, as unshakeable as I can make myself. “Any last requests, or preference for burial?” I ask.

*What an incredible man. What a fucking **brilliant** human being.*

Whitebeard offers me a smile that quirks up his goofy banana mustache. There’s an ocean of empathy and a soul-deep understanding in his eyes, illuminated brown almost to the point of being golden.

“My sons know my wishes. As for my body…” He regards me with eyes that say he *knows*. I have to look away, my gaze automatically moving to the beacon of this battle. “What would you suggest?”

I don’t look back at him. I keep my eyes on Ace up in the scaffolding with his stupid desperate face.

“Cremation, sir,” I suggest unflinchingly.

There’s a burst of heat, almost right on cue, before Marco touches down on Whitebeard’s opposite side in a sweep of blue and yellow wing-like flames. He gives me a curious but cursory look, then focuses his attention on his Captain. “Boss! The Marines received orders to proceed with Ace’s execution ahead of schedule..!”

“So I’ve heard,” Whitebeard hums back, chin dipping towards me.

Marco does a double take and actually turns to regard me this time. “Are you — ? You’re Ace’s friend, his brother’s First Mate.”

“Got it in one,” I grin, bending forward to see him around Whitebeard’s tall ass legs. “I’m Ed, it’s nice to meet you despite the circumstances.”

Dear god he really does look like a pineapple and I am *NOT* going to laugh in his face about it.

“Remain calm. Their plan is to make us panic, and we’ll show them what it means to come prepared to face any obstacle,” Whitebeard states evenly, voice low and his smile a simple confidence.

“Is Strawhat following some kind of plan?” Marco asks, sounding skeptical already about whatever my Captain’s reasoning is for a full frontal assault.

“Anything you do, don’t do it with the expectation he’s anything but a distraction or the tip of the spear,” I dismiss immediately. “Luffy is gonna barrel right through the middle as he’s one to do. It’ll *work,* because he’s crazy, but I definitely wouldn’t call it a *plan.”*

Again, as if right on cue, a rock in the road of Luffy’s dead sprint appears in the form of Adam Sandler’s stoned cousin. Kizaru, I mean. I don’t see where the fucker comes from — which ultimately isn’t that surprising all things considered — but between one second and the next there’s a kick like a lighthouse, and significantly higher than any man that age has a right to kick, aimed right at his head.

I barely have the time to flinch before Luffy is thrown out of the path of the beam by one of Iva’s crazy winks, and that’s about all the time there is before I’m left trying not to fall all over myself as the beam impacts water and explodes in a giant sphere of light, sending the Moby Dick rocking in the wake of it.

“Jesus fuckin’ CHRIST!” I yelp, overbalancing and nearly toppling over before the end of Whitebeard’s naginata catches me.

“So reckless,” he chides, wrinkling his nose at the Admiral distastefully.

“That guy has done nothing but piss me off in the few days I’ve known him,” I hiss.

“Maybe we oughta send Jozu down there,” he says lightly and my grumblings turn to a laugh. Marco gives the both of us a weird look but doesn’t comment beyond a raise of his eyebrow.

There’s another flash from deeper in Marineford’s defences, and this time the barrage of explosions (which don’t hit water and send us rocking, which would be great if they weren’t aimed at my husband instead) comes from a stupid goddamn Pacifista.

I breathe through the discomfort of just seeing one of those shits sending psychosomatic pinpricks of pain through my body and blink the bright spots all these explosions have left in my vision.

“Oh, you oughta be worried about them,” I blurt, suddenly remembering that.

“Who, the Warlords? *Kuma?”* Marco asks confusedly.

“Er — no. That’s not even actually Kuma, I don’t think,” I say doubtful. I straight up cannot remember. “Kuma-shaped cyborgs, and there’s bound to be a fuckton of them around here. I mean, with the bay frozen over there’s a lot of room to surround you.”

“Good grief,” he mutters discontentedly. “They just don’t know when to quit, do they?”

“You can say that again,” I mumble, rhythmically clenching and unclenching my hands.

I’ve lost Luffy in the crowd for a moment, but the sudden appearance of a black barred fence-like cage gives away his position easily enough. That, and him immediately going Gear 2 to

circumvent Black Cage Hina to demolish some random Vice Admiral.

Oh and the zombies. Moria (we really should have killed the dickhole on Thriller Bark when we had the chance) has done the abhorrent and unthinkable, and is raising the fallen soldiers of Marineford back from beyond the veil to keep fighting.

"They need an ethics committee formed *stat,* because at this point they've made me feel pity for the enemy with nothing but their own tactics," I spit in complete disgust. It's bad enough they're throwing their soldiers to the wolves, but defiling their bodies like that? *Revolting.*

Also there's a fucking half *bear* Marine and some kind of horrific half-horse half-man *thing* with four guns and an arm for each and just what the genuine fuck is that about. This guy needs to *die.*

Luffy takes a hit. I nearly jerk forward to rush to him, but—

"STAY AWAY, LUFFY!"

Ace's voice is like a fucking gut punch. Where Luffy is a bullhorn in a Walmart, Ace is bagpipes in the school gymnasium. It's cracked and raw, fraying at the edges and housing more wretchedness than any one man has the right to bear.

I can almost *feel* both Whitebeard and Marco tighten up from beside me. I hadn't even noticed the force with which the scream automatically made my muscles clench until I forcibly untense them as they cramp in protest.

"YOU SHOULD KNOW BETTER! WE'RE BOTH PIRATES!" Ace continues to shout, a thready and thin as crepe paper harshness over it like a veneer. "WE'VE BOTH SAILED THE SEAS! I HAVE MY OWN ADVENTURES! I HAVE MY OWN CREW! YOU SHOULDN'T BUTT IN!"

“Ace…” Marco sighs quietly, like *of course* this is the route he’s taking, and *of course* this is the way he’s trying to react, and mostly he just sounds tired *for* him.

“You’re such a weakling! You think I’ll forgive someone like you for rescuing me?! This is *humiliating!”* his voice fractures around words and wavers between sentences, becoming less convincing with every syllable.

My chest feels like it’s full of compressed air, with the weight of all the emotions I *know* Ace is feeling. The pressure presses in on my sternum, throat tight with it. It’s not fair. How could someone like Ace ever be made to feel shit like this? It’s not *fair.*

He’s so far away, all the way across the battlefield. My vision is mediocre on a good day — but the harsh line of his shoulders hunching, every shudder that wracks his frame, every hitch and every second of his eyes getting shinier — that’s all crystal clear.

Ace crumples in on himself like every word he speaks takes something from him he doesn’t think he’ll get back. His back bows like the weight of the screams makes his mouth heavy, and his voice fucking shatters into pieces.

“Go home, Luffy!” he demands, so thin and anguished it’s more plea than anything else. *“Why did you come?!”*

It gets to ring across the island for a matter of seconds, and that’s all the solemnity it gets.

“I AM YOUR LITTLE BROTHER!” Luffy yells, and it’s so loud and forceful compared to Ace it’s nearly laughable, but stops right at fitting instead. “I DON’T CARE ABOUT THE RULES OF PIRATES!”

Yaknow, despite the emotional weight of the situation, that part almost makes me laugh. Like yeah girl, me *literally* bending over backwards to accommodate pirate rules only for you to tell them to fuck off illustrated that one pretty fucken clearly already.

The battle never stopped and never got quiet per say, but the volume of shocked exclamations — as they have repeatedly during this shitshow, and doubtlessly will continue to — rising in triple sure make it feel that way.

"You raised such a dumbass," I huff up to Whitebeard, who inclines his head down at me. "Like, he's an *idiot.* He can't come by *all* of that honestly, some of this shit *has* to be your fault."

"Hey now," Marco protests indignantly.

"No, some of it is probably my fault," Whitebeard accepts humbly. "That son of mine is quite foolish, too foolish to source it all from one place."

I gesture up to him triumphantly, shooting Marco's exasperated face a smug look.

There's a resounding splash of water as Jimbei sweeps in to decimate the zombies ranks (including the bear thing thank fuck) and I am suddenly burning with jealousy that we didn't have him (or waterguns, now that I think of it. Why the fuck didn't we bring Nerf Super Soakers with us???) on Thriller Bark.

"What are you doing allowing a rookie to beat you up?!" a voice demands, tinny with the twang of a Transponder amplifying it. A shirtless giant in a Vice Admiral's coat advances on Luffy swinging a fuckoff huge club like he has any chance at winning. "This man is another danger for the future! He wasn't only raised together with Ace, but…"

The giant misses his swing and Luffy blows up a huge Gear 3 fist. He doesn't seem to give a singular fuck as to whatever is happening. I just huff an amused snort into my collar.

"He is also the son of the Revolutionary, Dragon!" Sengoku announces gravely.

Aaaaaand the shocked exclamations somehow get louder. At this rate why not just give everyone a Transponder to yell out of, it would reach the same volume and strain less vocal

chords.

Luffy slams his fist into the giant and puts him on his ass with a single hit. “ACE!” he shouts, completely ignoring Sengoku and his bullcrap. “I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU SAY! I’M GOING TO SAVE YOU EVEN IF IT KILLS ME!”

Honestly, the way Ace’s eyes gloss over as his teeth clench would nearly be enough to take me out in and of itself. How dare he look surprised at that. How *dare* any of this shock him.

Luffy tosses his head back to Whitebeard’s ship, eyes somehow automatically snapping to me in a way that makes me feel warm and tingly. “WEIGH IN!” he calls with a fiercely stunning smile, more teeth than the sun can handle.

Welp time to unload the self-worth monologue on his ass.

“STOP TRYING TO DISCOURAGE US, SHITHEAD!” I holler with the rising tide of bright-tinged resolve, determined and defiant in equal measure. “SAVE YOUR VOICE FOR THE HEARTFELT THANKS WHEN WE’RE DONE!”

“Why are you doing this?!” Ace croaks out, stretched thin beyond belief.

“This fucking moron,” I say aside to Whitebeard and Marco before turning back to our beautiful idiot. “BITCH WHY DO YOU THINK?! WE LOVE YOU, YOU STUPID FUCK, LITERALLY WHAT ELSE WERE YOU EXPECTING FROM US?!”

“SOME MODICUM OF REASON, PRIMARILY!” he shrieks back, face lighting up bright enough red Coin can probably see that shit from Amazon Lily.

“REASON?! WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK WE ARE?!” I wheeze back. The insinuation any person here would act with *reason* is so laughable I briefly entertain the notion that’s some clone/secret twin bullshit because honestly buddy you gotta know better than that by now.

I can see it on his face he thinks this is going too far. That no amount of love we have for him justifies the response this situation has garnered. Well, as previously stated, he's a goddamn motherfucking moron. But we forgive him for that because again, as previously stated, we love him.

"This doesn't deserve what you're giving it!" he rasps, reedy and so close to tears I almost want to spare him the emotional sucker punch.

Almost.

I suck in a huge breath, projecting like I've never before projected, and shout at the top of my lungs.

"NOBODY IS BORN HAVING TO PROVE THEY DESERVED IT! YOU DON'T NEED TO EARN THE RIGHT! YOU'RE A FUCKING PERSON, YOU JUST *DO!"*

I can all but hear the sharp sucked in breath despite the distance. I can all but see that shine overflowing in his eyes to the point of tears. I can *absolutely* feel how much he wants to believe it.

I haul myself up onto the rail of the Mody Dick, feet planted to push off and muscles coiled for a lunge. "THERE'S NOTHING *EVIL* ABOUT JUST EXISTING!" I declare with the biggest and brightest grin I have, nothing but absolute sincerity left in me.

"Marco… I won't forgive you if you let those two die," I hear Whitebeard mutter with clear warmth behind me.

"Roger that," Marco chuckles back.

I can feel the warmth of Luffy's approval down in the throes of fighting, and the beating heart of Marineford skips to the tune of my pulse as I push hard against the railing and launch myself into the battlefield like a comet, gravity and reverence at my back and my Captain and his brother ahead of me.

I hear the song of the universe beaming it's encouragement, a rallying cry and call to arms I'd be a fucking idiot to ignore.

Then I'm too deep into the thick of it to hear anything more.

Chapter End Notes

This song gives me big feelings and I have a lot of big feelings in general so yaknow I had to do it to 'em. This chap was so fun to write lmao. Can you tell I really like Whitebeard? I really like Whitebeard.

Also *y'all.* I never noticed it before but in chapter 558 of the manga when Ace is having flashbacks to swearing brotherhood with Luffy you can see the edge of fucking Sabo's third sake cup and when I say this Took Me Out. Today's chapter came out so late in the day because I was too busy being *emotional* with my *big feelings.*

SSSBMTY update has been pushed a week back because of course it has, I'll see you all on the 23rd!

Chapter 130: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty: I Love You Honey, I’m Ready, I’m Ready To Go

Chapter Summary

Million Dollar Man - Lana Del Rey

“NO NOPE ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT!” I scream, turning the other way and once again sprinting away from my problems.

Chapter Notes

You know I had to do the Lana to 'em. You know I'm gonna do the Lana to 'em again before this leg of the fic is over.

GOD doing group projects with people you're friends with is so hard because bitch I love you you're my little pookie but you have just monumentally fucked me over and I WILL probably take this grudge to the grave :/ So school is still going great obviously. I miss sleeping.

God may be conspiring to break the hips of both my grandma's, but he underestimated where I get most of my spite from. Also go check on your grandparents y'all they'll appreciate hearing from you (unless they're dead or you've got a ✨complicated relationship✨ in which case ignore this and idk say hi to a neighborhood cat instead).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A smarter person than I would have clocked from the get-go that launching oneself across a heavily fortified island full of people both strong and perceptive enough to do something about it would be very attention grabbing, especially after making an impassioned speech.

The key words there being: a smarter person than I.

As it is, I don’t work that out until I’m a good halfway to the plaza and nearly to where Luffy and Iva are in a confrontation with Kuma, whereupon I am *extremely rudely* yanked down the ten-ish feet I was above the ice by a grip on my ankle.

I barely get the chance to squawk before the unfortunately familiar feeling of Smoker's cloudy ass arm encasing my limb reels me out of orbit (and breaks my concentration, asshole) towards his already swinging jutte.

"OH YOU FUCKER—" I yelp, arms instinctively jumping up to protect my head from the blow instead of trying to catch myself, ready for the fucken shiner I'm gonna be sporting in the wake of it.

Instead, I hit the ground on my ass as there's a whirl of fabric and a long leg cracks into the arcing strike of the jutte — and the damn thing *snaps in half.*

I gawk up at Boa Hancock as she swings up from the sweep of her kick, skirt swirling around her ankles as her snake coils around and looms up over her, the skull on its head leering down at Smoker as his face rapidfire falls through expressions.

"You insolent fool!" she hisses, back arching as she points down at him and stares down her nose so hard it would be easier for her to make eye contact with me behind her than with him.

Bro how the fuck is her neck not cramping from craning it back so hard?

"What the fuck," I whisper, half marveled.

"How dare you," she snaps, fucking *incensed.* "First you attack my beloved, then you have the gall to ignore me in favour of attacking this… this one! You impudent worm!"

Ok damn bitch, I know we aren't *chummy* but being relegated to 'this one' still stings. At least I'm not *impudent worm* I guess?

“You Strawhats are coming out of the damn walls,” Smoker growls under his breath, and after a moment shifts the pieces of his broken jutte into a two-handed guard. “Do you have any idea what the Marines are going to do to you after you’ve gotten in our way?!” he demands, directing his ire at Hancock.

“Do what you will,” she sneers imperiously, head tilting down to a more reasonable angle, though her chin remains raised.

“Put that in your pipe and smoke it!” I holler over her shoulder at him, scrambling to my feet and hoisting my middle finger. Smoker scowls and Hancock twists around to scrunch her nose and give me a judgemental look. “Oh come, on that was funny,” I mutter with a frown.

Forever unappreciated in whatever time I’m in.

“Thanks for the save though, Princess!” I say, grinning up at her with an eye-squinting smile. “You were kinda late on the fuckin’ draw, wouldn’t have minded some preemptive action to stop me from getting yoinked in the first place, but I appreciate you nonetheless!”

She doesn’t snap at me for the insult, which is the first weird thing. The second thing — Hancock looks away. *And blushes. Fucking* ***blushes.***

Oh no.

My jaw drops in immediate horror. It isn’t the scowling upturned nose thing I got over and over again on the trip to Impel Down, it’s straight up red-faced the same shit she’s been doing with Luffy *blushing.*

“You’re twice my age and I’m barely legal, woman! And I am MARRIED!” I shriek, pointing an accusing finger at her.

“W — *WHAT?!”* she stammers, hands coming up and clapping onto her cheeks. “I — you — why I NEVER!”

Smoker gives us both an incredibly judgmental, slightly disgusted look.

I point my other finger at her, turn around, and run away screaming.

Not shooting across the island horizontally anymore, because it's one thing to get there fast, it's an entire other to manage it without getting an Admiral up my ass. And if there's one thing I know about my ass, it cannot take an Admiral.

The battlefield is loud, I think the Whitebeard fleet started firing on the Marines at somepoint because Jesus FUCK is the cannon fire HAPPENING, so my screaming isn't really that out of place. Plus all the other people screaming around me means I'm not unique in my suffering.

I *am* unique in the fact that there genuinely cannot be another being on this fuckhole of a planet with as extraordinarily and outlandishly horrendous luck as I have.

I've just jumped up to kick some guy across the face and use his back as a springboard when a spike of pain drives through my left temple, spreading black spots over my eye as that mostly familiar whisper of my almost-useful Haki squalls a warning.

I drop into a flat flop, shoulder bashing off ice as the guy I jumped off of *straight up splits in fucking half at the waist.*

"Why is it always me?" I whine, so high pitched it may as well be inaudible.

"Fufufufufu, how interesting," the exact voice you don't want to run into in a dark alley chuckles and *oh boy howdy,* just when you thought this trip couldn't get any worse.

I scramble to my feet in a violent rush, somehow managing to kick myself in my own ass which is… impressive if nothing else, and spin on where the voice came from with one of my

pistols clutched tight in my hand.

Doflamingo is unironically the most buttfucking ridiculous figure to ever terrify a man to his core, crouched atop a pile of dudes and framed by his entirely too big and poofy pink feather coat, with his creepy little bitch fingers held aloft and outstretched as they wiggle.

“NO NOPE ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT!” I scream, turning the other way and once again sprinting away from my problems.

“Where are you off to?” Doflamingo calls, voice entirely too amused and getting closer and closer despite the several ice chunks and different guys I vault over.

“I’M ABOVE THE AGE OF MAJORITY! YOU WON’T WANT ME!” I shriek, sliding under the meeting strikes of a pirate and Marine mid fight, and just barely missing getting drenched in blood as they’re sliced to actual fucking pieces behind me.

I hate everything about this so fucking much I’m about to burst into manic tears in the middle of this battlefield.

His evil goddamn laugh sounds again and the vision in my eye, which had only just cleared up from the first one, is struck by another twinge of pain as I dive straight for the ground and nearly knock myself out doing it.

The peaks of the frozen waves for a good twenty feet in front of me — and the heads of at least four unlucky fucks — just fucking sever off in a clean line, like a hot knife through butter.

I’m back on my feet before the pieces even fall, leaping into a rolling dive through the middle of another fight. I am gonna be so goddamn mad if I die to this asshole here of all fucking places without even having made a single one of the jokes I want to throw at him.

“CROCODILEEEEEE—!” I start screaming hysterically, ready to beseech the fucking gods for this one.

And like a guardian angel, a middle aged amputee cuts in with a huge whirlwind of sand and another coat very much ill suited for today’s weather. Then again, with the ice maybe it’s sort of practical? Either way Crocodile, my actual fucking savour, is sudden there and Doflamingo makes a delighted sound, like a weirdo.

“Alligator-man! Fancy seeing you here, is it not?” he says brightly.

“Don’t try anything. Or do you want to be killed?” Crocodile snarls back.

“You’ve got some mouth on you, fufu!” Doflamingo cackles, grin audible in his voice. “Why don’t you and I hook up?”

I choke and trip over my own two feet and… smoothly… turn it into a slide that almost looks purposeful as I kick out the ankles of a group of Marines.

This fucking guy. Literally what is this man. There are a million normal ways to phase proposing an alliance, and that is not fucking one of them.

I keep running away from that situation because absolutely the fuck not, no thank you, not in any lifetime if I can help it. I slam my hand into the solar plexus of some idiot who thought taking a stab at me was a good idea, and launch him into another like a speeding train.

There’s a loud sound that makes every single hair on my body stand on end, every sense I have screaming out at once and with a great cracking boom, the entire top half of the glacier surrounding Marineford separates from its base and begins crashing down into the bay.

Jaw on the goddamn floor, I jerk my head around to find where Luffy is facing off against Mihawk. Mary mother of Jesus, this world is a nightmare. We’re living in a fucking *nightmare.*

I start booking it that direction, like a moron, firing four consecutive headshots into people getting in my way. There's a familiar scream, and I look up to watch Buggy soar over me in a tall arch before landing right in the middle of my Captain and Mihawk's fight.

Well. Nice knowing him.

The clown gets sliced six ways to Sunday, multiple times, but he's saving my bitchass husband doing it so pop off you funky little bastard. There's an explosion entirely Buggy's fault and I lose visual of the fight for a second, and when the smoke clears up Luffy has rushed ahead and I have no idea where the clown has been blown to this time.

A silly dressed man with a handlebar moustache and tophat engages the world's greatest swordsman in Luffy's wake, and I sprint past them as close as is safely advisable (in a vague metaphysical sense, since nowhere on this goddamn island counts as safe against the walking butcher shop).

"I'M REALLY SORRY ABOUT CALLING YOU A GOTHIC VAMPIRE BIRD WHEN WE MET YOU'RE JUST REALLY INTIMIDATING AND OFF-PUTTING IN AN UNBELIEVABLY CUNTY WAY AND IT THREW OFF MY BRAIN TO MOUTH FILTER —" I holler to Mihawk as I go, and am reward by him making an actual expression.

I mean it's mild incredulity and deep, deep disappointment, but a win is a win aight?

I'm stopped from catching up with Luffy by some Vice Admiral — no one I recognize but sporting a bigass spiked club and a tricorn hat that clashes wildly with his dress shirt — swinging his club right for my head with the intention of cracking it open and splattering it like a watermelon.

I catch the hit off the barrel of my right pistol, immediately swinging it up to blast an impact shot with all the force he tried to hit me with into his jaw. He manages to jerk his head back, and the shot just obliterates his hat right off his head.

“You little shit!” he growls, batting at me with a backhand swing and shouting when I fire a stored up sword slash into forearm. He drops his club in shock, and I take a beat to make a mocking laugh sound.

Friendly reminder kids, don’t fucking gloat in the middle of fights.

The Vice Admiral makes a feint attack for my gun hand, and gets a hand around my skull when I fall for it like an idiot. I shriek and kick out at him at the same time I try to swing my pistol up to shoot his ass, but his other hand closes around my hand and clamps my fingers to the grip in such a way I literally can’t fire the trigger.

I get a heel into his liver which makes him grunt, but his hands clench tighter and I yelp at the pressure, free hand scrambling at the one half obscuring my vision with my nails clawing and violent.

There’s the crack of gunfire, and the hand around my own goes limp as the Vice Admiral hollers. Once I have freedom of movement over my fingers, I raise my gun and shoot a hole right through his face.

I remove the fucker from my person, and turn to look for my saviour. The most beautiful person I have ever seen in my life comes running up with a group of people behind them, two pistols of their own in hand.

“That’s some gun you’ve got. You alright?” Izou of the Whitebeard pirates asks, and I’m left gaping because *uh fuckin’* ***wow.***

“Holy fuck I think you’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen in my life,” I blurt and feel absolutely no embarrassment over that fact because Jesus Christ.

Izou just snorts. “You know Boa Hancock is just over there, yes?” he says amusedly.

I look over to where Hancock is still just beating the SHIT out of Smoker and make a face. “Yes, we’ve met. I rest my case,” I say sourly.

Izou fucking loses it laughing. I’m empathetic to the response because I, too, find myself hilarious. The rest of the pirates, the other squad Captains, are somehow laughing harder than even he is.

“As you say, strange one,” Izou chuckles, tipping his chin forward. “Come then, let’s go help your strange Captain.”

I love this man more with every word he says.

I slip my second pistol out, swiftly dispatching a handful of attackers. “You come here often?” I ask jokingly in the absence of anything else to say.

Izou starts laughing again. “No, can’t say I do,” he replies, firing shots in a wide arc with precision I’m half jealous and wholly enamoured with. “And yourself?”

“Nope, this is a first for me,” I say cheerfully, then promptly slip on ice and go sliding like a hockey puck into some guy who was rushing us, shrieking all the way.

I… I am an embarrassment upon my family name.

I kick the guy upside the jaw, firmly knocking him out, then scramble up to my feet like nothing happened and that was totally on purpose. I need to move to a new country and die to atone.

“You ok?” one of the other squad Captains calls over.

“I’m going to go try and get myself killed now BYE!” I yell back, breaking into a dead sprint away from them. Girl the *embarrassment.* The *humiliation.* IN FRONT OF THE PRETTY

MAN?! IN THE *MIDDLE OF BANTER???*

That's about the time I'm violently thrown off my feet again, this time through no fault of my own, as the bay lights up in a spray of explosions. While I was too busy being an unmitigated moron, the Pacifista's had surrounded the bay and started firing into it indiscriminately.

"Christ," I curse under my breath, pushing once again back to my feet and grimacing at the Marine battleships being caught up in the assault. God these people are such dickbags.

It's fucking *messy* out here. There's bright flashes as Luffy is halted by Kizaru yet again — Izou and the squad Captains' destination apparently — and a whole slew of other shit going on that's just so goddamn overstimulating it's a straight up miracle I haven't flopped to the floor in a coma yet.

Sengoku has apparently been trying to cut the camera's, deadass, and failed because if the ability to film things exists bitches always gonna be filming shit. And by that I mean Buggy actually did something I told him to do around getting ineffectually sliced to pieces and getting tossed around by other people's attacks.

I actually run up past where he's huddled with a bunch of his lackeys, talking to the snail cam as one of the former inmates directs it. "Chat, you're not gonna believe this shit," he says exasperatedly, waving his hand to the snail operator to get him to point it at the bay. "The fuck are these guys doing?"

I immediately burst out into hysterical wheezes so intense I can't even be upset I slip on the ice this time, I just let myself slide and accidentally ram some guy over.

Buggy looks over with a derisive glare. "F in the chat," he says flatly, and I can't even get up because I'm laughing too fucking hard. "Oh my — keep my goddamn camera straight!" he berates the guy moving it, staring at the snail and grimacing. "Scuffed ass setup," he mutters.

I changed my mind I'm ok with dying right the fuck now, I'll do it happily. What the fuck kind of place is this? I'm reevaluating this being hell, I might have just got hit by that car and sent right to heaven.

“THAT’S MY STREAMER!” I yell maniacally, genuinely just crying as I slap my hand into the guy I tripped and flinging him into another group of Marines.

Some other Marine tries to get at Buggy, presumably to shut down the cameras like Sengoku requested, but is immediately put down by the horde of Buggy’s followers. “I’m being streamsniped!” Buggy shrikes, sounding downright offended. “Mods, ban this buy!”

I have never felt closer to god than here on this battlefield.

“Chat is this guy cooked? They’re totally firing on their own people,” he scoffs disgustedly. “What the hell are they thinking? MonkaS.”

I’m gonna have to kill Coin when this is over, no other choice. It’s gotta be done.

I have to actually just willfully tune out the clown so I can get back to my feet and get back to making my way up to the execution platform, as amazingly hilarious as that is I *do* have a job to do and I’m on a fucking time crunch.

I keep shooting and hitting and jumping as I make my way closer to the edge of the plaza, fighting through soldiers and idiots and everyone else who tries to stop me. There’s so much righteous fury locked in my body it’s a miracle no one has yet managed to get a more devastating blow on me than a bone-rattling hammer swing to the arm.

I might have jinxed myself, I’m not going to lie.

Like it’s answering the universe’s unspoken rule of ‘don’t let Ed have it easy in anything ever, especially if they’re thinking they’re doing well,’ my advance is halted dead in its tracks by the incoming swing of a sword — fast enough it nearly takes my bangs off my head before I manage to get my pistol up far enough to glance the blow away.

The origin of the attack, a broad man in an officer's coat and a visor cap over long purple braided hair, follows through on the attack with a grace that says he expected the redirect. He started the strike high and ends low, crouched on the ice as my guard raises instinctually.

"Apologies, I'm paid to insist you stop," he says smoothly, straightening with the sabre he nearly lopped my head off with pointed down across his body.

"Well if you're getting paid," I respond sarcastically. *"My* apologies, I'm morally obligated to ignore your suggestion."

The Marine nods calmly, his free hand smoothing down his moustache. "So be it," he sighs.

"So be it," I echo.

He rushes me without any more preamble, and I'm entirely unprepared for the force behind his strike. I'm flung five feet back, barely managing not to fall over or lose grip of my gun and barely managing to recover in time to fire a couple shots as he comes at me again.

He fucking deftects them with his sword. I swear to god he cuts one in half. Bitch *what,* where has this guy *been?*

I lunge into a roll, catching his hand with the sole of my shoe and knocking his stab at me off track, then blasting a column of fire up at his head. He twists around it, just barely not catching the bow on the end of his braid on fire and grabbing onto my shoe.

He uses it as leverage to vault over my head in this wild flip that low-key mesmerises me to the point my hands jerking up to shoot at him is a second delayed. With a short burst of my Devil Fruit I spring up from the ground and do my own flip over his jab.

I parry a series of strikes as he comes at me with a flurry of blows, pushing me into taking several steps back so as to not get my goddamn fingers cleaved off. "Lord almighty, they *better* be paying you dude, you're fucking terrifying!" I huff around a gasp, shaking out my

wrists in the lull between hits. The weight behind some of this guy's attacks is starting to HURT.

"Well, I do my best," he says humbly. "Glad I've impressed you."

He has. But…

There is a little something.

I know I don't have the most amazing defense in the world, my long and glorious record of broken noses and other bodily injuries is testament to that. It's sloppy at best, and with the precision this guy shows with his swordwork, it wouldn't be outrageous if he had managed to at least maim me by now.

And yet.

"This just a day job? You moonlight as a baker or something in your free time?" I ask conversationally.

"Can't say I'm much of a baker," he responds easily, getting back into the action without hesitation and ducking and weaving the several shots and several wacks I try to get him with.

"Stationary making then? Perhaps an aspiring calligrapher?" I wheeze, taking his surprise kick to my chest and rolling with the momentum to come back at him with a roundhouse kick of my own.

"I do enjoy a nice well put together piece of stationary," he allows, managing to twisting his sword around the barrel of my left pistol and disarm me by flinging it into the air. "Not a hobby, however."

“Artisanal salad dressing enthusiast. Flower pressing?” I continue, dodging his swing and catching my pistol out of the air and firing it in one smooth motion. I follow that up by nearly tripping during a dodge and instead jumping over his follow up strike. “...Falconry?”

The Marine laughs. “Unfortunately I can’t say I’ve ever entertained interest in any of those,” he replies, taking my fist to the cheek significantly better than I would have. He does follow it up by backhanding me so turnabout is fair play.

“Historic architecture admirer? Closet mobster romance lover,” I guess, trying once again to burn his bushy moustache off his face with my gun’s flame dial and failing miserably.

“I don’t read enough mobster romance novels to have a firm opinion,” he chuckles amusedly, tossing his sword up to switch hands and nearly talking my leg off at the knee before I pull my stupid acrobatic shit to dodge. “I am a fan of architecture, though. Good guess.”

I brighten at the praise, and don’t even try to bite him when he makes a grab for one of my guns. “Really?! Ok, uh… the historical role of hidden architecture in spycraft.”

He blinks at me twice, side stepping a couple of shots and tilting his head consideringly. Then he gives me a slow smile and takes a step back, nearly in the same position we started in. “So be it,” he chuckles, almost to himself.

I frown a little at the reaction. I open my mouth for another quip, and that’s when he shoots forward at twice the speed he’s been going so far, *absolutely* letting me block the strike he threw out around flipping over me.

“Oh holy—” I curse, trying to jerk my arms up to shoot.

“Best of luck,” he says with a smile, then swings at me like he’s trying to bat me into orbit.

I cross both pistols in front of me frantically, but the blow still takes me THE FUCK off my feet and sends me careening across the goddamn bay.

“OH FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK—” I scream, and then I hit the retaining wall of the plaza.

Chapter End Notes

I had WAY too much fun with that fight at the end, Commodore Jean-Rousseau my BELOVED you are so interesting and sexy what does anything you do MEAN. Just know you guys were spared the spontaneous lecture about column orders from their banter because I posses too much knowledge about Corinthian and composite columns that is constantly trying to break its way out of my body. I will not let it, don't ask, research it yourself my child and become wise.

There is so fucking much going on in this chapter it's amazing.

Boa Hancock is great because she's just in the corner like 'your complete lack of interest heart of gold and autistic rizz have captivated me' and I cannot even blame her. Like bitch me too what am I gonna say. Is Ed freaking out over nothing and misreading shit? Homie who knows we'll get there when we get there.

See y'all next time I love you byeeeeeee

Chapter 131: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty One: With Your Dark Brother Wrapped In White

Chapter Summary

Holland, 1945 - Neutral Milk Hotel

Truly, the trajectory of my life and the sheer amount of lucky breaks I've gotten would baffle any mathematician worth their salt. As would the trajectory of my stupid fucking ragdoll of a body.

Chapter Notes

Shoutout to my grandma dying literal hours after me posting last chapter. What the fuck is up with that. AO3 writer's curse heard me deny its influence and took exception to that. Real bad bitches push off processing their grief until after the semester is over ✌️ (don't do this).

Full disclosure next chapter is for sure gonna be in three weeks instead of the usual, these next two weeks are going to be so nightmarishly busy with the end of my sem I doubt I'll have time to sleep, let alone write. I foresee several, a medically inadvisable number I'd assume, all-nighters in my future. So instead of posting a chapter I'll probably be doing a final exam or one of the genuinely unholy number of projects I have. Isn't that a fun tradeoff. Pray for me y'all, I'm gonna vomit from stress.

Anywho LOVE this song Aachria certified banger have fun with the chapter xoxo!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As always, I somehow manage to be both the luckiest bastard alive and the world's favourite victim of circumstance.

Truly, the trajectory of my life and the sheer amount of lucky breaks I've gotten would baffle any mathematician worth their salt. As would the trajectory of my stupid fucking ragdoll of a body.

All that is to say; when I hit the retaining wall I somehow manage to be aimed directly at the open hole of a doorway, and extend that fucker by a good foot by bashing half-through the edge of it.

I roll/bounce — because if there's no days off for heros' idiots certainly don't get them either — and bash off at least four more walls (multiple of which I *absolutely* go through), break something that splinters like wood, and just barely escape smashing my skull open on unforgiving stone by my arms wrapped protectively around my head.

"Fucken *ouch,"* I wheeze on the floor. You'd think I'd be used to this shit by now, honestly. "He did *not* need to be doing all that."

I think I black out for a bit, I definitely lose some time slumped on my side with a great view of nothing but wall and ground, before I'm rudely urged back to coherencey by a disruptive mixture of weird rumbling, too loud whispers, and the further distant sound of yelling and fighting.

"...otice the distinct lack of *uniform?"* one voice hisses like it's trying to be quiet. "That means it's a damn *pirate!"*

"They came through the wall," another adds uncertainly. "I mean, do you really think they tossed *themself* with enough force to partially collapse a tunnel *on purpose?"*

The first voice seems to hesitate a second. "Well, either way we're down here with them, and I say we're better safe and taking them out now than sorry when they spring up and kill us later," they say with vicious finality.

"Alright that's a little extreme for a primarily noncombatant," a new voice mutters.

"Oh so now you have a problem with me being a noncombatant?" the first voice hisses again.

“He didn’t say that, and it’s a little extreme for a person unconscious on the damn ground,” the second voice says again, flat and placating all in one.

“An unconscious pirate is one chunk of rock dropped from high enough away from being a dead pirate, and a pirate that isn’t our problem,” first voice guy argues.

Alright I think I’m just a tiny bit offended this chucklefuck is advocating for my murder right above my head.

I turn over and sit up in as fluid a motion I’m capable of, staring blankly ahead for a moment as the voices all squeal like startled teenage girls in chorus. I slowly turn my head to look at the group of Marines, three of them scrambling backwards away from me with panicked looks and a huddle of give or take five-ish more behind them.

“What the fuck,” one guy whimpers, identifying middle dude in a blue polo shirt scuttling away as voice number one.

“G’evening..?” I mumble, squinting at the group and the odd mix of cadet uniforms and polos like Jonah wears. “Where the fuck am I.”

Visually, not a lot of clues. Stone roomish-hallway with subpar lighting, the broken remains of a wood *something,* a collapsed wall half blocking a hall, and what’s looking like the only serviceable exit via another hallway that seems to abruptly switch styles into that classic Marine tile and paint that was present throughout G8.

“Bitch I did *not* get punted all the way into the base, no fucking shot,” I groan, somewhere between a scoff, a wheeze, and incredulity.

“Are you a pirate?!” voice three guy demands, the one on the left in uniform.

“Oh my god no that’s the *Detective of the fucking Damned—”* voice one guy wheezes, catching sight of my face.

“Do any of you have guns you’re gonna shoot me with?” I ask in response. All of their eyes immediately drop to where my pistols are still (miraculously) cradled in my hands. The Marines in the traditional uniform move their hands as far from their pieces as they can while standing naturally, while voice-one-middle-guy baulks.

“Are you going to shoot *us?!”* he shrieks shrilly.

“I really wasn’t planning on it?” I say honestly, holstering my guns with a flourish. “I’ve got no damn idea where I am, and frankly you look scared shitless of me.”

“I’m not *scared shitless—”* he starts to protest before getting cut off by second voice guy, on the right in a lilac polo.

“You’re not in the base, you’re under it,” he states, answering my earlier question. “Well — more like under the plaza.”

“Don’t tell them that—” voice one objects.

“The fuck are you guys doing down here?” I question, bending my knees and testing their mobility. I mean it doesn’t feel *great,* but nothing in my body has felt above ‘good enough’ since…

Damn bitch, I have not been sound of body since we landed on Thriller Bark.

“We were *trying* to evacuate,” voice three says testily, shooting voice one a nasty look. “We got a little turned around.”

“More like *someone* wouldn’t take anyone else’s input on where to go,” one of the guys in the back mutters.

“So… you’re all lost and it’s this knucklehead’s fault,” I summarize, jerking my chin at an increasingly flustered and offended voice one.

There’s various sounds of agreement from the whole group, and voice one hunches his shoulders and glowers at everyone who’ll meet his eyes.

“Sick, cool, great. So I don’t suppose you know how to get back up to the plaza either,” I sigh, pinching my nose bridge.

“Why would that even matter? It’s not like we’d help a pirate get up there anyway!” voice one squawks, very much transparent in his efforts to take back control of the situation.

I raise my eyebrow at him and knock some chunks of rock and splinters off of my shoulder. “You planning on fighting me, big guy? I think you might be all on your lonesome on that one,” I say mildly, dipping my head toward where the other gathered Marines are trying to subtly gesture at this guy to knock it off.

Voice one sputters for a moment, looking quite betrayed by his comrades. The humor of it is instantaneously offset by the room/tunnel around us shaking and shuddering, the lights flickering as all the Marines instinctually duck down and I blink wide alarmed eyes at the space around us.

“The fuck was that?!” I yelp, jerking like I could scramble to my feet when I know damn well my ass is gonna need help getting up.

“I don’t know, it’s your merry band of morons attacking the island!” voice one cries, clinging to voice two who looks like he is being gripped entirely too tightly for comfort.

I pause and wince a little bit as the shaking subsides. “...Yeah that’s probably Whitebeard,” I mumble.

“I’m thinking we better get the FUCK out of here before he accidentally brings this whole place down on our heads!” voice three proposes, with accompanying enthusiastic nods and agreements from the peanut gallery.

“I need to be back uptop yesterday,” I grunt, trying to push myself to my feet and hissing as my back introduces my nervous system to a whole new flavour of ache. *“Fuck,* forget getting scoliosis before my 30s, I’ll be lucky to have a fucking *spine.”*

“Why the fuck would we get you anywhere?” voice one repeats, looking around at his contemporaries incredulously. “You’re just gonna go back to fighting and killing Marines, or free Firefist! We can’t just let you, let alone help you!”

Voice three makes a derisive sound. “We don’t even know how to get out from down here, and that hall,” he gestures back to the half collapsed one, “which *was the exit,* is no longer functional because the siege walls are up!”

Of course, that’s when the shaking starts again. Like it fucking heard him, the shattered chunks of wall tumble inward, completely cutting that exit off. The lights go haywire again, and cracks begin to form along the ceiling way too close for comfort when I can’t fucking scramble back fast enough.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” I wheeze, sharp rocks digging into my elbows as I backwards army crawl as fast as I can and the Marines scramble and panic. “Oh sweet hell, someone get me the FUCK out of here!”

“I think I can help with that,” a familiar voice in an accent that shouldn’t belong to it says from the uncollapsed hallway. We all turn.

And there, staring down at me and looking like the honest to god patron saint of revolution, is Sabo.

“You’re my hero!” I immediately wail, throwing my arms up in complete relief. “Tell me you know your way around this fuckhole!”

He tilts his head, the flickering lights doing INSANE things to his prosthetic eye as he smiles. “Let’s get going,” he says in answer, gloved hands hooking under my arms and hoisting me to my feet with absolutely no effort.

I half collapse — much like the hallway — almost instantly, my legs taking a second too long to remember they’re legs while Sabo steadies me and I clutch at his shirt. “I love competent people so fucking much,” I sniff dramatically.

Sabo laughs. “Then let’s hope your ego is just as much self love as it is confidence in your skills,” he says lightly, then his eyes (eye. The other one just kinda moves halfway the right direction before giving up) flicker to the Marines. “And are these gentlemen going to be a problem?”

“Not a problem!” someone shrieks.

“Not a problem at all!” another screeches.

“They’re real fuckin’ lost and need a way to somewhere that isn’t gonna collapse any minute,” I cough, straightening up and making a face when some weird shit moves in my ribcage. Fucking Christ was that my ribs rubbing together? Oh homie I *definitely* have broken ribs. I’m gonna puncture a lung and fucking *die.* “Speaking of, let’s skedaddle with *haste.”*

I get skeptical looks all around. The Marines are eyeing Sabo distrustfully, and Sabo is eyeing them right back with the disinterested apathy only an old lady on public transportation is capable of.

The shaking tapers off, and with a terrifying crack one of the light fixtures crashes out of the ceiling and lands in a crackling heap on the ground.

“We’ve all worked out our differences? Great!” I yelp, tugging on Sabo and trying to get my legs moving the opposite direction of the crumpling room.

“Follow or not,” Sabo advises the group, then takes me by the elbow and begins leading me into the hall at a brisk speedwalk my body doesn’t *love* but my gay ass sure does.

I hear the tell-tale patter of Marine issue boots identical to my own following after us, bar a moment of hesitation.

“There’s no direct route up to the execution stand from here, the pathway up there is too guarded for a stealth operation and we’d have to get pretty high up to use it anyway — big waste of time,” Sabo explains as we move.

“You got an alternate route ready, or do you want input?” I ask, squinting at the bright fluorescents in the finished halls. Well, ‘finished.’ There’s enough built up dust in here to choke out a toddler with asthma and half the offshoot halls we pass are dark spooky ominous.

“If you’ve got a plan I’m open to hearing it, but if not I can pull something together,” he responds. “First order of business should be whatever you want to do with those bozos, however.”

We both glance back at where the Marines are following in a huddle of whispered arguments. When they notice us looking at them, they immediately shut up. We turn back forward.

“I honestly don’t give two shits other than ‘out of immediate harm.’ I figure anyone off the battlefield right now is a good thing — less combatants, and less casualties. Today *really* doesn’t need any more casualties,” I murmur with a wince.

Sabo hums consideringly. “Fair point. As soon as we get to a route they can follow, we can send them off.”

There’s another dull rumble that shakes the halls, though this time much less intense and life threatening. The lights of the labyrinth flicker for just a moment before the shaking subsides, Sabo steering us down into a dark creepy ass hallway.

“Yeesh, at this point why not just shell out the whole plaza and be done with it,” Sabo mutters acerbically, using the hand still on my elbow to steady me when I nearly trip due to the lack of light. “Everyone keeping up back there?” he calls behind us.

There’s a squeaked “yes!” in response, much closer than it was before — I have sympathy for a bunch of losers being led down unstable halls, especially in the dark, so I say nothing about the closing distance. I do, however, blink twice as we exit out into another lit hall and I think a little harder on Sabo’s words.

“Hey,” I start with a grin beginning to slowly curl into my mouth, “you know a way up to any cannons from here?”

Sabo slowly turns to regard me, a glimmer in his eye as he nods slowly. “I can get us to the heavy artillery set around the lip of the bay,” he says lightly. “Would you like to use it?”

“Would I ever,” I respond gleefully. “Those things looked pretty hefty from what I saw, you think operating one is a two man job?”

Sabo hums a considering sound, but my attention catches on the noise one of the men behind us makes. Me and Sabo both turn, and voice two’s eyes widen as his face twists up, clearly not knowing what to do now that he’s got our attention.

“Er — um, the uh, the cannons up there take two men to operate,” he supplies with an awkward look. “Especially if you want to manoeuvre them.”

“Why are you telling them that?!” voice one whisper screeches, clutching hands into voice two’s polo.

“Dude, stop pinching me!” he whisper shouts back, slapping at his fingers.

“Alright, cool, got it,” I mumble, tapping my chin in thought. “I’m gonna need a volunteer,” I announce.

The hallway is filled with dead fucking silence. I stare at the Marines. The Marines stare at me. Sabo is also staring at me. There’s a lot of staring going on in general.

Finally, voice two steps forward.

Voice one immediately makes another grab for him. *“Are you fucking mental?!”* he whisper shrieks again, voice significantly higher than before.

“You know how to operate one of those things?” I question, getting a hesitant nod in return.

“Noncombatant, ***noncombatant!”*** voice one squalls, pitch climbing rapidly. This guy is gonna work himself into a panic. Or give himself a hernia.

“Being IBD doesn’t mean we’re *incompetent,”* voice two says protestingly, trying to work voice one’s grip out of his shirt to little success.

“It does classify you as noncombatants though,” voice three speaks up tensely, looking like he can’t decide between pulling voice one off or helping him. “And makes our job,” he jerks his chin at the other Marines in uniform among the group, “of escorting you out *significantly harder.”*

Voice two starts inching towards us, trying to shake voice one off. “You don’t gotta — can you stop? You’re gonna give yourself an episode!” he caws, pushing at voice one’s face as he begins trying to grapple onto him like a squid.

Me and Sabo exchange looks somewhere between amusement and incredulity.

“I am NOT filling out a casualty report if these people murder you!” voice one shrieks, pointing an accusatory finger right in our faces. I just make a ‘really dude?’ expression at him. “If I have to explain to the Commodore that I let you *walk off* to die AND *COMMIT* ***TREASON*** they’re gonna execute *ME* NEXT!”

Ok that feels a little dramatic. I’m not even gonna make him do anything all that dangerous!

There’s an imperceptible shift in the air, and my hand shoots out lightning fast to latch onto Sabo. Then the *entire goddamn hallway tilts*.

“HOLY FUCK!” I shout as we all barrel sideways and slam into the wall.

“WHAT THE SHIT?!” voices one and two shriek together.

“Whitebeard,” Sabo supplies with a huff of breath, wincing at the combined screaming of the Marines.

The hall starts tilting back the opposite way and my arm snaps out across Sabo’s chest, anchoring him to the wall as I keep our axis centred and the others tumble across into the opposite wall. The hall then once again tilts, leveling out with an ominous rumble and flicker of lights.

After a long tense moment, I slowly return our centres of gravity to normal and lower my arm. “Good geriatric Christ,” I curse, settling back into my feet and helping voice two (and voice one, by virtue of him being clung onto two like a leech) up.

“This is you pirates’ fault!” voice one wails, clutching voice two tighter while he tries fruitlessly to pry him off.

“Ok, we need to move now,” Sabo says flatly, then reaches out in a flash and slaps voice one across the face. Noises of shock all around, but voice one stops shrieking and grappling voice two in sheer shock, jaw on the floor. “I’M RADICALIZING YOU!” Sabo says loudly, and

voice one's mouth snaps shut. "Pull up your damn bootstraps! Two lefts, a right, then up the stairs — that's your exit! Now MOVE IT OR LOSE IT!"

Voice three seems to snap into a salute from where he's gotten back to his feet beside us on instinct at the order before realizing that was fucking dumb, then grabs voice one and begins shuffling away. He shoots voice two some furrowed brows and blinks, seems to get what he's after with voice two's nod, then jerks his head around to the rest of the accompaniment.

"You heard the man! We have our escape route, now hoof it before this place comes down around our heads!" he barks, then they're running as a unit according to Sabo's directions, leaving us and voice two behind.

Voice two stares after them for a moment with a solid, blank expression, before looking back to us with trepidation.

"Right," I say shortly. "Great. Now let's get the fuck outta dodge!"

"Roger that!" Sabo snorts, then the three of us are back off into the maze of halls at his lead with a faster pace than before.

"Just for the record, I'm not gonna shoot you. And if we get caught in trouble, I'll cover for you," I state, glancing back. Voice two nods slowly, drifting forward from where he was behind us to run alongside us. "Also, what the fuck is your name? Calling you voice two just feels mean."

He makes a confused face at the epithet. "Uh, Lewis?" he offers haltingly.

I give him a thumbs up. "Cool, nice to meet you Lewis. You want something to cover your face and uniform just in case? I'm not out here tryna compromise your job on my account."

Lewis looks like he is having a very hard time keeping up with the chain of events that has occurred around him. "Y… Yes? I think?"

I shrug off my beat to absolute shit shirt and offer it over. “I don’t have a balaclava on hand, sorry.”

Sabo’s arm reaches across in front of me holding a bandana he pulled from seemingly nowhere. “Here, for your face.”

Lewis takes both with a very overwhelmed expression, shrugging my shirt on over top of his own. Bless Coin and his wide ass shoulders.

Sabo brings us down another hall, then to a staircase as we finally begin ascending upwards. I’m getting mildly concerned that the lecture I’m going to receive after this about the extent of the damage done to my body, and all it’s glorious and horrifying outcomes, is going to be longer than I’ve spent trying to fucking get here.

“So, why’d you volunteer?” I ask, shooting Lewis a curious look.

He waits a beat and a few more steps up the stairs into the next hallway before answering. “I recognized your voice,” he admits quietly.

I take a second to let that — and all its implications — settle in before grinning at him. “And I recognize the sheer size of your balls,” I laugh, clapping him on the shoulder. “Now why do you, Mr. Noncombatant, know how to operate this fuckin’ cannon?”

Lewis makes an ugly snort. “Won a bet with Straussberger, how else does anyone get shit around here?” he says wryly.

“Why even *are* you still here? All nonessential personnel shipped out hours ago,” Sabo questions. “I know for a *fact* the IBD should have already left.”

Lewis makes a face. “We were supposed to be identifying and working intel about all the pirates that showed up, but our base of operations was ordered to evacuate after Whitebeard’s attack destabilized the area.”

Me and Sabo both make ‘ahh’ faces. “Yeah that tracks,” I hum.

“Fair enough reasoning,” Sabo adds.

“Wait how the fuck did *you* find me?” I suddenly ask, twisting my head to stare at Luffy’s blond psycho of a brother.

He shrugs with a mild smile. “Saw you get punted into a wall, figured since I was headed down here I’d swing by and pick you up. I’ve been mapping these tunnels *extensively* — not that that information is gonna be much use after today — so it wasn’t a huge bother.”

“What exactly *are* you down here to do?” Lewis asks trepidatiously.

Sabo just keeps smiling mildly.

“I think it’s a surprise tool that’ll help us later,” I mutter, not quite able to bite down a smile.

“Last staircase, then there’s a hatch and we’ll be back in the thick of it,” Sabo reports, gesturing ahead. “Our window of opportunity once we’re up there won’t be terribly long, so best to lay out the plan now.”

“Alright,” I say with growing anticipation and a growing grin. “We’re gonna shoot me out of a fucking cannon.”

There’s a momentary pause from my companions. “Wait what?” Sabo breaks the silence.

“We’re gonna fucking WHAT?!” Lewis squawks, choking on his own spit.

“Honestly — don’t be surprised at the insanity, it’s an insult to my predictability,” I scoff. “I mean really, what else would we be doing? Shooting *Ace?”*

“How about shooting actual ammunition?!” Lewis wheezes desperately, whacking his hand into his sternum to clear his airway.

“Booooring,” I drawl, rolling my eyes. “Sabo, input?”

The man in question blinks slowly at me once, then twice. “…Yeah alright,” he agrees. “Doable. We put you in the cannon, me and our pal Lewis here’ll aim and fire it. No problem.”

I LOVE COMPETENT PEOPLE! I LOVE COMPETENT PEOPLE WHO DO THE STUPID SHIT I SAY WITHOUT COMPLAINT!! I LOOOOOOOOOVE COMPETENT PEOPLE!!!

“It feels like a problem!” Lewis wails, clutching at his close cropped curls.

“Better put that bandana on now,” Sabo advises brightly as we reach the hatch he mentioned.

Lewis does, and we’re left with nothing but his tearful eyes to look at.

“This is making me depressed,” I mutter. “You look like a kicked fucking puppy, this isn’t even top ten of most asinine things I’ve done this week!”

“That is so far from comforting I think I’m gonna be sick,” he whimpers in response.

“I’d ask you not to vomit in my bandana, but I don’t suspect I’ll be getting it back,” Sabo sighs, then puts his palms above his head flat on the hatch. “You both ready?” he prompts.

“Like a whore with an appointment,” I confirm brightly.

“What the *fuck,”* Lewis cries into his hands.

“Perfect! This should be right beside a cannon, to the left if I’m remembering correctly. I’ll take the far side, Lewis you take near one, we flip the barrel to face inward then Ed you hop in and curl up as tight as you can!” Sabo instructs with a half feral smile, then he shoves the hatch up and open and all three of us spring into action.

I don’t even get a super in depth view of the battlefield as I sprint for the cannon, tackling the only person currently near it to the ground and smothering his screams before brutally and efficiently knocking him out.

“Ed! In, now!” Sabo orders, and I jump to my feet as the pair of them get the cannon oriented and lowered enough for me to reach.

I hoist myself up and straddle the barrel before sliding forward and shoving myself down it feet first. Thank *god* these things are fuckin’ huge. “Send me off, Rocketman!” I holler up it, now with the sole circular view of the execution platform as my compatriots take aim.

“You’re gonna want to clench up!” Sabo calls cheerfully. “Brace, and… FIRE!”

Then, with a great big explosion of force and momentum, I’m shooting through the air like a motherfucking bullet once again.

Chapter End Notes

Living by the cartoon logic rules of One Piece always and forever.

Little bit of a step back from the action as we inch closer to our conclusion, there should only be a couple more chapters of Marineford left and I'm sure you're all incredibly anxious about that conclusion, try to contain your pitchforks until then kay? Kay. :)

The real stars of the show are and always have been the Intel and Bounty Division my beloveds, Jonah doomed them all to a fate of radicalization the minute he decided to get fucken mugged on his lunch break in Loguetown.

Black Country, New Road dropped a new album on Friday and it FUCKS. Like I miss Isaac Wood's vocals because his voice was so unique and there's really no topping Ants From Up There as an album, but Forever Howlong comes fucken CLOSE. The vibes are so fucking scrumptious and I just adore it. Go listen to it right now.

Chapter 132: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Two: Say Your Last Words, This Is The Last Time/You And I, We Were Born To Die

Chapter Summary

Born To Die - Lana Del Rey

Four; oh son of a fuck-faced eel riding backwards on a tricycle bound for not just hell, but the level below hell, honking God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen on it's fuck-faced horn.

Chapter Notes

Heeeey guuuuuuys. So we've got some shit to go through, you fuckin' ready?

First off, hi I missed you :) I love you guys and I missed you :):):)

Next, I just want you all to know I'm an academic weapon with a 92% average and the pussy poppin' academic power to back it up. Every time I forget I'm actually like, as a concept, a horrendously impressive individual I get reminded in the most thoughtful ways. Like I'm a triple threat that can write, draw AND 3D model??? I'm really cool guys. I keep forgetting because I'm a perfectionist.

Moving on, it's the two year anniversary of Surely Some Star Binds Me to You on Wednesday! I have been here too long. Not to sound insane, but I though I'd be done by now. Lmao. I've got some art Imma be dropping day of on my Tumblr, which I'll link back here when I do, because it has been SO long since I've given y'all art and I have improved SO much and I'm just very excited to have had all of you incredible people along for the ride with me :) No matter how long you've been here or if you're reading with way after it's posted, I love y'all and writing this for you has meant the world to me and more. ♥

And lastly; this chapter features some mentions of genocide, child murder, the murder of pregnant woman, ye olde war crimes and various other atrocities. Because of course it does. If you don't want to read that, maybe skip the impassioned rantings. (Most of this is impassioned rantings if I'm being totally transparent. I think it's fun thinking about the things that characters would get pissed and have strong opinions about.)

ANYWAY ON WITH THE CHAPTER!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I've done some pretty stupid shit over the years. This is not one of those times.

Ok actually that's not really true, this is so fucking stupid I think they're gonna have to add a new word in the English dictionary to describe the sheer levels of gall and lunacy I just managed to reach, but my point is that however ill conceived, this stupid shit is like. Viable.

Yeah.

Anyway, in the clarity that shooting through the sky propelled by the full force of a high-powered heavy artillery cannon grants me, I come to several realizations it probably would have behooved me to have a couple hours ago — hell, a couple *minutes* ago — instead of right this fucking second.

One; the human body probably wasn't designed to do this in *any* way shape or form, and the fact it doesn't immediately kill me leads me to believe my Devil Fruit has something to do with it — like juggling up my physiology with the assumption I would be doing this kind of assfuckery to myself on the reg just *came* with the power to turn. So thanks, Devil Fruit. You're a G.

Two; it might not have been the best part of the plan, leaving the aiming of the — once again — *high-powered heavy artillery cannon* to the half-blind guy with WHACKED depth perception and the scared shitless noncombatant Marine. Just… just maybe.

Three; *allegedly* there may or may not be a not insignificant human error factor in the act of um. Being a cannon ball. ***Allegedly.***

Four; oh son of a fuck-faced eel riding backwards on a tricycle bound for not just hell, but the level below hell, honking God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen on it's fuck-faced horn.

Homie, I am not approaching my destination at the optimum angle. One might even call it a *sub* optimal angle, if one wanted to be an asshole about it. If I smash my face off something

and break my nose I'm going to be *SUCH* a bitch about it.

I'm trying to course correct, my hair is being buffeted directly into my eyes, I have no goddamn idea if I'm going fast enough to avoid getting fly swatted by an Admiral — really the whole production is a bit of a mess, I cannot lie to you.

So in sequence it ends up going something like this:

I slam (hysterically screaming) into the platform beside Ace (who is staring at me in unabashed horror), *bounce* (because of fucking course I do what the fuck), smash into one of the executioners (who also starts hysterically screaming), roll a good three more bounces (I smash my face off the platform and I have never been more inscensed) before going right over the edge (predictable, but infuriating), *nearly* fall to my death (being a badass, I save myself), nearly get *yanked* to my death (executioner guy grabbed my fuckin' ankle), and STILL manage to hold on by the skin of my teeth.

All in all, really solid 7/10 on the effort and implementation. Not my worst, but quite far from my best.

I glance down at the executioner clinging to my ankle, beaming pleading eyes up at me while I experimentally shake my leg and he frantically shakes his head, then huff an exasperated sigh and start climbing up with him still attached.

It takes so much fucking effort because the guy is being a total deadweight and shrieking every time I jostle him, and I end up having to smack him off my leg once I fucking finally muddle my way through dragging us both back onto the platform proper.

We both stare at each other for a long moment once we get to our feet. Then I mercilessly Sparta kick him in the chest right back off the ledge. "THIS IS MARINEFORD!" I holler after him while he screeches the whole way down.

I watch for a moment after he lands, just to make sure I didn't *actually* fucken kill the guy with the fall, and the loud groan and "ooooooooooow," he makes is good enough for me.

I spin toward the rest of the platform's occupants, including Sengoku who has never looked more baffled or willing to commit a murder suicide in his life, the other executioner (who has a suspiciously familiar face), another executioner who is there for… some reason (the cheesy and over the top wink is also *very* familiar), and Ace, with tears actively pouring down his face and neck craned all the way back to stare at me with a look of unfiltered distress and judgement.

Well. Oops.

I spread my arms and grin, feeling blood slide down my (fairly confidently unbroken) nose and over my teeth while an explosion goes off somewhere in the background. "ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?!" I crow.

I'm mixing my references, and I don't think I care.

"You fucking nightmare," Ace chokes out, sounding pained and disbelieving.

"A performance was demanded of me and I am nothing if not a deliverer of goods," I say humbly.

"Garp, did you see that coming?!" Sengoku shouts over the edge of the platform without looking away from me.

"NO?!" Garp shouts back.

"OH MY GOD IT'S THE FISTER!" I yell, not even able to see the man, immediately and without hesitation.

"WHO TOLD YOU TO CALL ME THAT?!" comes the instantaneous response, which I ignore with utmost satisfaction.

“You would not believe the traffic getting over here, I should *not* have to beat people off with a stick to spend some time with you,” I tell Ace with an air of disappointment and distaste.

The laugh that comes from him gets caught up and choked on a sob, and I love him so fiercely it could leave me breathless.

From the two gouges sheared into the edge of the platform on either side of Ace I know we’re already past the point of Crocodile thwarting one attempt at an early execution, and a glance at the plaza overrun with Whitebeard Pirates and the very much worse for wear state of the man himself gives me a shaky idea of when exactly I’ve managed go drop myself in the middle of.

“Sudden will to live and the appearance of this one aside, this execution will be going forward without any more delays!” Sengoku snaps, way more hostile than he surely *needs* to be. “You might have an oddity I’ve only seen once before, but that won’t be nearly enough to do anything about it!’

“Girl fuck you!” I immediately gape back, because girl *fuck* you. I’m bouta kick this man’s ass on Coin’s behalf. “You’re calling our schtick an *oddity?!* That’s so reductive! I have *not* been hyped up by that man for longer than you’ve been growing that travesty of a beard to get undersold like this!”

There’s a rapid flash of emotions across Sengoku’s face before it settles into jaw-set and livid understanding. “So that’s who you are, then! You’re the fabled child of Leon D. Coin, the Tailor of Purgatory!”

Dude. *Dude.* Is this fucker late to the party or have I just not been obvious enough?

“What?! No way! Why didn’t he tell me?!” I gasp dramatically, sarcastic enough to melt faces.

Garp makes a choking sound from where the fuck he is below the platform and there's some shouts of shock around the plaza, and I gather (with malicious glee) that his Transponder is still on and broadcasting our conversation.

Sengoku's face twists up in annoyance and Ace makes a wet snorting sound he tries very awfully to cover up when the Fleet Admiral's look flicks to him. "What a sick coincidence, three children of some of the biggest threats to the world all in one place! For the good of all, we'll put you down together, right here and now!" he states tensely.

Someone needs to shut Ben 10's geriatric grandpa up, good looooooord.

Oh wait, that's totally my job.

Right.

"Uh—" I start, before Sengoku cuts me off.

"We as Marines, as the safeguard between the common people and devil spawn like you, have a sacred duty to fulfill! We will not allow you to continue like this!" he continues, like a bastard.

"Can you stop being self righteous for like five minutes please—" I try again, more than a little irritated.

"The evils of your blood shall not be left to chance! This will be the last time you run so rampant, we'll end this era and you right along with it!" he announces with way too much confidence for a man with a whole ass seagull on his hat. I mean *seriously.*

"Enough!" I growl, rapidly reaching my fucken limit.

"You will—!" he starts to continue, but Jesus Christ *no.*

“You wanna threaten me, Sengoku the Buddah?! Hah?! Fine! I have no problem airing your dirty laundry!” I bark, taking hold of my wits end and tossing that bitch down into the dark, dark hole my impulse control supposedly lives in. “I have no shortage of atrocities to pick from! How about we start with fucking *Baterilla?!”*

There’s the barest of flinches across Sengoku’s face, his expression hardening. “Baterilla was a necessary measure to—”

“To fucking *what?!”* I cut him off with a snarl, lip curling up and eyes flashing. “You accomplished NOTHING! How many infants died, how many pregnant women murdered — for that matter, how many non-pregnant women were killed simply on the off chance they could have been?! What could POSSIBLY be your justification for that when the living, breathing proof of your failure is sitting right there?!”

“What could you possibly know about the nuances of the situation—” he hisses, eyes darting anywhere but me.

“Oh, that’s not a good enough example for you?!” I yell unrepentantly. “Let’s talk about Shell Town and the Conomi Isles! Let’s talk about Ohara! Let’s talk about Flevance! Dressrosa! Fishman Island and the slavery you let run rampant on Sabaody! There’s just no *end* when it comes to what you people will let slide! So why don’t you shut your *CRACKER BARREL ASS UP* AND ***LET ME DO WHAT I HAVE TO DO?!”***

Sengoku gawks for a moment, mouth gaping open and closed before he seems to catch a scrap of his wits. “What do you know about half of that?!” he strangles out in a demand, and it’s possibly the *worst fucking response he could have conceivably thrown at that.*

“YOUR COVER UPS ARE WORSE THAN YOUR HAIRCUT!” I bellow, just barely holding myself back from, stupidly, throwing my entire body weight into jumping this motherfucker. “I’M THE PIRATE WHO KILLED SPANDAM, YOU REALLY THINK I DIDN’T DO MY DAMNED RESEARCH?!”

I mean I didn’t do research because of that specifically, but it’s the sentiment that’s important here.

“You think we all just woke up one day and decided crime was the goal?! No! We see the shit you do, the fucking nightmare in complying with your authority, and we decide we’re better off on our own!” I squawk, taking a step forward.

“Oh yes, the droves of pillagers and murderers that flooded the seas at Roger’s insistence were so *noble* in their destruction!” Sengoku snaps in retaliation.

“Oh no! The existence of a few failed thrill seekers has destroyed my entire argument!” I cry with false sincerity. “You ball headed bastard, stop arguing like a prep school wannabe politician, it’s pathetic and should be beneath you! It’s clearly not, because the simple concept of standards seems to elude you completely, but I expected you to at least make an *effort to pretend!”*

Sengoku’s face twists up in a rage and Ace makes what I think was supposed to be a ‘bro you might wanna knock that shit off or we’re both gonna get sunshine blasted up our asses’ sound. I pay him no mind.

“As long as villains like you haunt this world, the Marines will never disappear or bow!” Sengou proclaims stubbornly. *Never bow to someone you could make kneel.* “And it’s you pirates — pirates like YOU, lineages of rotten intent — that have created this stain of an era!”

“For fucks sake you don’t need to keep blaming Roger, at this point you’ve handmade more than half the pirates out to get you!” I say, half hysterical and with more laughter than is realistically appropriate. “You’ve shaped some of the strongest people in the world into your enemy and you have no one to blame but yourself! Don’t you get it?! Screw rotten lineages, the World Government has fucked over so many kids you’ve all but raised an army!”

At this point I don’t think I could stop my own runaway car of a mouth even if I wanted to.

“We aren’t some simplistic evil going around burning orphanages and gunning down innocents in the streets, the Marines were created to safeguard against acts just like those!” Sengoku refutes. The fact I’ve known the Marines to do literally both of those things makes

his point more than a little moot. “As long as there are those who carry the blood of the devil, as long as that boy exists as legacy of that man’s pure evil—”

“GOL D. ROGER WAS A BETTER MAN THAN YOU’LL EVER BE!” I shout with my whole chest, another two impassioned steps taken forward, and the shocked look on Ace’s face is worth every bit of agony it causes.

Sengoku somehow manages to get angrier at me, and I’m not sure if I’m hallucinating the weird gold glow or if this man is actually about to go full Shin Sūsenju on our asses. “How dare you—!”

“NO ONE IS GUILTY OF THEIR PARENT’S SINS!” I holler, and I just barely keep from coughing as I feel blood start slicking up my throat once again. “YOU DISGUSTING, VILE, OBSTINATE RAT FUCK, THE MAN IS DEAD! STOP PROJECTING YOUR *UNREQUITED OBSESSION* WITH THE GUY ON THE EASIEST TARGET YOU COULD FIND!”

“WHAT ARE YOU EVEN *SAYING?!”* he yells, and the look on his face is so beyond anything it eludes description. “This isn’t *personal,* this is justice for crimes that oppose the values, the very *essence* of the Marines!”

“Bitch *please!”* I cackle helplessly. “Your system is a machine that pumps out its own enemies! You’re stuck in a self-fulfilling system you have *no way* of stopping from eating itself, and I am going to fucking *laugh* while your burning crack shack of an institution implodes into DUST!”

He is so clearly done with my shit I’m genuinely amazed he's not tearing out his hair. “WHAT IS YOUR *PROBLEM?!”* he screeches irately.

Oh I hope this fucker is mad. Oh I HOPE he’s fucking mad, because I’m about to go *fucking* ***apoplectic.***

“My problem?! You don’t even understand the *PROBLEM?!”* I holler, gesturing wildly and just barely restraining myself from yanking at my *own* hair. *“* The fucking *issue* is that the

Marines are an *organization* and ‘pirate’ is a *LABEL!”*

The fact this doesn’t seem to register, that this seems to go completely over these people’s heads — it’s fucking *baffling*. It’s beyond frustrating to the point of utter unfathomability.

“YOU stand for something, pirates are just what you call your outlaws! We make no allusions to believing or fighting for the same thing, what unites us is what *you* call us and the fucking ONE PIECE, which half of them don’t even want or think is REAL!” I continue, adamant in getting this point across. “Some pirates may be the scum of the earth, but at least we don’t go around with the word *justice* carved into our backs waxing poetic about the greater good with a gun to the heads of innocents!”

“So now you’re denying that pirates can *organize?!”* Sengoku balks, pointing out to the battlefield.

Fucks sake they won’t even need to kill me, I’m about to throw MYSELF off the side of this platform and do it *for them.* “Did I fucking say that?! You’re *missing my entire point!”* I shriek furiously. “You’re a system, which means you have to take some *fucking responsibility for the actions of your collective!”*

“Putting on a Marines uniform, wearing a jacket with Justice on the back, that is a sacred oath!” Sengoku howls, once again missing my point by a damn near quarter mile. “Each and every one of us understands the duties and responsibilities that come with that! The sacrifice it requires!”

“Do *YOU?!”* I shout hoarsely, taking yet another step forward to jab a pointed hand at our surroundings. “Do you understand what the actual fuck you’re doing right now?! What you’ve *DONE?!* Do you have *ANY* IDEA how many of your men have *DIED* TODAY?!”

“They are necessary sacrifices in our pursuit of the greater good!” he roars. “Those men have fulfilled their duty to the Marines, and you have no right to question that!”

“It’s not *DUTY!”* I’m losing my fucking mind. I should never under any circumstances feel like the only sane person in any given space. “They’re men who are dying for *NOTHING!*

You've willingly led every single one of them to slaughter for *nothing* but *BULLSHIT!"*

"You think I don't know the burdens of my own position?!" Sangoku demands, red faced and angry. "Even still the Marines stand united, and *they know their oaths!"*

"FUCK YOUR OATHS! *PEOPLE* ARE DYING HERE!" I scream, arms sweeping out wide and voice rife with desperation and an indignity I can barely put words to. ***"PEOPLE! YOUR** PEOPLE!* I NEED YOU TO GIVE A FUCK ABOUT THEIR LIVES IF YOU'RE JUST GOING TO JUSTIFY THIS *TRAVESTY!* I NEED YOU TO *CARE* THAT YOU'RE KILLING THEM!"

"I CARE!" he bellows. The weight behind the way he says it actually gives me a second of pause. "I CARE, AND THEIR SACRIFICE MEANS SOMETHING! We will wipe the stain of piracy clean starting with you lot, and begin a new era of peace and safety, and it will be because *those men* gave their lives for it!"

"God! You just never fucking learn!" I cry with an incredulous laugh. "You're entirely incapable of change, impervious to goddamn reason! As always, it's like you can't even fathom you're not infallible!"

"What is your personal grievance with all this?! What exactly do you think the Marines have done to you?!" he bleats, shrill and exasperated in equal measure.

Oh. Oh biggest mistake of this man's career, he's given me an *in.* I have been given an opportunity, and I take that bitch by the nuts.

As I see it I have two options. As always, I choose the funny one.

"You don't even remember what you did to me?!"

The look on Sengoku's face, oh yeah. Yeah that's the good shit. The panic and confusion, the very obvious scan of memories, trying to place my face and where he could have possibly

wronged me, uh huh. *The good shit.*

"Who *are* you?!" Sengoku demands with desperation I don't think he's used to feeling.

I smile with every ounce of viciousness in my body, and scream my introduction from the top of the lungs. "My name is E. D. Domino, the Detective of the Damned!" I crow. "First Mate of the Strawhat Pirates! I'm the Eyes of the future King of the Pirates, and I'm here to turn the fucking world on its head!"

I don't think I've even been so sure of my purpose, of who I am. I've never had the clarity or the complete lack of doubt in my identity. It's no longer just a name I blurted out without thinking, a title I couldn't bear the responsibility of, the vague notion of goal or motivation.

I know exactly who I am. I know exactly why I'm here. And *god,* it feels *fantastic*.

So I end my tirade with a shout that comes from the deepest part of my being, the grin of a menace and the wild eyes of one cursed with the gift of prophecy slapped on my face, and not much more than the intent to unnerve and mystify.

"I KNOW THE NAME OF YOUR GOD YOU PIECE OF SHIT, AND I AM *NOT FUCKING IMPRESSED!"*

Like a bullhorn in a Walmart, like the heavy twang of a gong, the sudden buzz of a trumpet, Luffy's laugh takes me out of my zoomed FOV right back into the real world.

It hits me, suddenly and mortifyingly, that I got so damn engrossed in arguing with this fucker I quite literally lost all track of the battle around me. That's embarrassing, that's actually *so* goddamn embarrassing.

In the real world, where Ace is gaping and so beyond disbelief he might have astral projected into dissociation based on the look on his face, where Garp has been absolutely bitchslapped

clear across the battlefield, where there's a crumbling bridge of stone that led up to the platform, that's where my Captain is.

And Luffy just bursts out laughing.

"Thanks, Ed!" he proclaims, and I don't even know what he's thanking me for. "I have the key, hold on!"

"Holy *fuck—"* Ace chokes out, and it sounds like laughter and sobbing and I'm nothing short of breathless right now.

Of course, Sengoku the Worst Man Currently Present decides this is probably the time to actually start fighting, and I see him start to grow larger and take on that (definitely not hallucinated this time) golden sheen.

I lunge the short distance that was left between me and my boys, and there's a brush of attention over the tops of my ears that has me already reaching for the giant sword-like spear things in the hands of the uniformed Bon Clay before my feet have moved.

With speed I genuinely didn't think was left in me, I'm already halfway through swinging the weapon in front of where Luffy is reaching out to fit the key into Ace's cuffs when the beam of light catches right on the flat of the blade.

Sengoku grunts as the shot of light that Kizaru intended to destroy the key deflects off his now shiny golden forehead and streaks off elsewhere.

I'm already looking towards the uniformed Mr. 3, and from his terrified "meep!" I have no doubts he knows exactly what I expect from him.

I throw myself into my boys with eyes trained straight forward as someone yells out "FIRE!" and a barrage of cannonballs comes bearing for us in the same motion as Sengoku raises a massive fist.

I have the hooks of my powers in the platform. With little more than a thought and a tug, Sengoku isn't even facing the right direction when he strikes out.

The world goes white as a dome of wax closes over our heads, and the boom of the first clash of cannon fire colliding with the outside is dull. The platform rattles, shakes, and collapses under us as more cannonfire keeps coming.

Even with all the noise in the world, there's nothing that could possibly drown out the subtle and final sound of a key turning the pins of a lock.

There's a burst of heat, of light, of nothing but pure unmitigated *warmth*—

It's nothing I've even contemplated before, the way we as people *mesh* and *combine* with our Devil Fruit powers. The way we well and truly exist in the abilities, the way they come from us and are more *intentional* than an extension of us.

Thermodynamics, no energy in the universe can be created and none can be destroyed, conservation of mass — the effects, they *are* us. When I make something turn, that force is *me.*

Poetry in motion aside, the point I'm trying to make — it really shouldn't be a surprise. When we're wrapped up and surrounded in a cone of flames, with a calloused hand grasped firmly over the delicate skin of my wrist — that it just feels like *Ace.*

"You really have always been like this, Luffy!" he says, and I swear to god I feel the words come from the actual fire licking around us, sometimes touching but never burning, vibrating like it's got its own vocal chords. "Never listening to a word I say, and always overdoing it!"

The flames part around us, leaving us suspended in the air with the bright blue sky all around. Ace looks back at us, my arm in one hand and the other clenched tightly in the back of Luffy's shirt, and it's so obvious he can't control his smile.

“You’re both fucking morons!” Ace laughs, wet despite all the fire and grinning with all of his teeth.

“Tell us something we don’t know!” I cackle back, light like near-victory ripping through my chest and my hand grasping right back on his wrist in turn.

Luffy doesn’t even say words; he just makes a sound in the pure expression of joy, and it’s more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a game of 'how many italics can I use before someone cries' and I'm pretty sure I won.

Remember like forever ago when I was a huge liar and said I wouldn't go back on my word about never watching Star Wars. Yeah me neither, I definitely didn't immediately cave and watch the original trilogy with my mom that literal night and I absolutely haven't been stuck in SW hyperfixation hell since then and I FOR SURE didn't write a 1,500 word essay on it for one of my classes (I got a 90% on it but my prof said she enjoyed reading it and I got a 100/100 on the rubric and not a shred of feedback so I Do Not Understand why it wasn't a 100% and No I'm not salty about it). I wouldn't do such a thing because I am a Principled Man. Glad we had this talk.

If you're a Canadian over 18 and you haven't already gone to advanced polling, you ARE voting tomorrow. Because I said so. You can vote for whoever you want, do your research and pick a candidate you actually support the policies of, but I will be very disappointed in you if you don't do your civic duty and participate in the electoral process. It matters, it matters to me, and it matters that you care enough to go through with it. Even if you hate everyone running and just vote for fucking Parti Rhinocéros Party, go vote.
Endlessly irritated I have been forced to care about this. Deeply upsetting. But also consider they give you stickers when you vote :) we all like stickers :):):)

Anyway guys next chapter is the Marineford finale and the theme song is Forever Young by Alphaville. Does that make you more or less nervous be honest. Bitch if I was not morally obligated and endlessly infatuated with the Lana you KNOW this chapter would have been Body to Flame by Lucy Dacus because it's SUCH an Ace song.

See you guys in two weeks please don't try to kill me then love you bye!!! :D:D:D

Chapter 133: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Three: Do You Really Want To Live Forever?

Chapter Summary

Forever Young - Alphaville

“Good god, being stuck in prison did *not* do you any favours on the greasy front, for fucks sake they didn’t even hose you down before sticking you in front of a live studio audience? When was the last time you had a shower?” I add with a hiss of sympathy.

Chapter Notes

I need you all to preemptively promise not to shoot me. I need you to promise. I want your word that no matter what happens in this chapter you will not hurt me. I am paying for nobodies therapy and I will not be handing out any monetary compensation. You put yourself in this jacket, now zip that bitch up.

Lmao that makes it sounds so bad, I'd like everybody to remember that at my core I am in fact a small little soft thing that would like only to hold and be tenderly held and one of the core tenants of my being is Commit to The Theme of Love as Hard as You Possibly Can, so keep that in mind for this one.

Also keep in mind there's still like 7 or so chapters of the fic left and this is only pre timeskip we're in. Everything is going to be fine and I love you :)

Also I saw Naruto - The Symphonic Experience and it was fucken transcendent. It was actually so goddamn good. I almost cried thrice. This might kick off another Naruto phase and get me back to working on that Naruto fic I was writing. The world wouldn't recover.

Also happy Mother's Day!!! Endless appreciation for all my mom readers!!!
(This chapter is so fucking late in the day (literally the latest I've ever posted, fucking embarrassing) because I was visiting the only two moms left in my immediate family lmao big sorries but also go tell your mom you love her or something.)

SHE'S A BIG ONE GET READY FOR OVER 5K OF FUCKIN' ***YIKES*** BAYBE!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luffy had grabbed both Mr. 3 and Bon during our escape from the collapsing platform, which I only notice when he tosses them both in the air before Ace brings down a column of flames to clear our descent into the plaza

“No one get careless!” he orders, swinging Luffy and I forward for the chance to get our feet under us before we hit the ground face first.

“Gotcha!” Luffy responds, making sure both him and I touch down in battle-ready positions.

Bon lands in a graceful sweep of legs somewhere behind us, and Mr. 3 slams into the ground on his face. Confident those two can handle themselves, I turn my attention elsewhere.

“You guys good to fight?!” Ace asks, fire licking us his arms and billowing up around us.

“Of course!” Luffy responds around heaving lungs.

“Anytime, anywhere!” I laugh breathlessly.

“Never in a million years could I have dreamt up *this* would be my rescue party,” Ace says, and I can hear the smile and earnestness still present in his voice. “Thanks, you two.”

Luffy laughs bashfully. “It’s just ‘cause uncle Whitebeard and his guys helped us out!”

“We had nothing better to do, and you’re kind of a big deal, Ace!” I snicker, eyeing the approaching threats and twirling my pistols into my hands. I briefly glanced down at the fire dancing at our ankles and do a double take. “They took my man’s shoes, when will the madness end?!” I cry in indignation. “Prisoner slippers are *not* a look on you, my dear.”

They really let him keep everything but the weapons, hat and cunty boots, huh?

“Shaddup and focus!” Ace squawks, just shy of sounding hurt by it.

“Good god, being stuck in prison did *not* do you any favours on the greasy front, for fucks sake they didn’t even hose you down before sticking you in front of a live studio audience? When was the last time you had a shower?” I add with a hiss of sympathy.

“Oh my god, put me back on the stand if you’re gonna shoot me dead regardless,” Ace yelps, briefly unigniting one of his hands to gently smack me upside the head. But I mean really, with that lank ass oily hair, what defence could the man possibly have.

“Rude! Also that was in such poor taste—”

My bullshit gets interrupted by Luffy yanking me to the side and all but dropping me to the floor out of the way of the volley of bullets the encroaching Marines fire at us, letting them bounce off him harmlessly and ricochet back into the stupid fucks.

Two guys come in swinging swords before Luffy gets shoved down to my level, which is all well and good except he had been in the process of pulling me back upwards so we just barely miss cracking heads and end up in the weirdest tango dip I’ve ever been a part of.

Either way, the swords pass through Ace like they’re nothing while he does a handstand on Luffy’s head, smirking at the guys. “Hey now, no need for that! Hands off if you don’t mind!” Then, like the lunatic he is, he blasts them to hell with fire. Because if you can, you might as well.

I’m *actually* pulled upright this time, and do another double take at the state of my Captain. “Did someone fucken stab you?” I demand, squinting at the bloody gouge in his chest. “Did someone stab you *multiple times?!”*

“Everyone is getting stabbed, it’s a stabby event!” he says defensively.

“Oh, a *stabby event,* my mistake!” I scoff, using reflexes I straight up didn’t know I had to deflect a bullet with the guard of my gun, twising around and firing right back at the fucker who thought he could try.

It’s economy of movement, a concert of action as the three of us dance around each other in a wild and lurching array of attacks and dodges. The smooth, second nature fighting I’ve done side by side with Luffy is seamless in its addition of Ace, making up for shortfalls I hadn’t even noticed existed until he’s already got them covered.

Still, it’s fighting a bunch of assholes who just don’t know when to fucking quit.

“This is so much unnecessary effort!” I complain, throwing my head back to whip my hair out of my face and to give Ace a look. “They don’t even *need* to charge you for the crime of being born, they can just charge you for the innumerable accounts of serial arson and grand larceny!”

“Ed!” Luffy complains.

“What?! They could get him for consorting with revolutionaries too, while we’re on the topic!” I add contemptuously.

“And the piracy, which is a crime!” Ace adds matter-of-factly, pushing back another group of Marines with another blast of fire.

I plant a hand on one of Luffy’s shoulders, flipping myself upside down and cracking my heel down onto the head of a Marine, then using that momentum and a nauseating mid-air somersault, launch myself feet first into another one coming up behind Ace’s back.

“GET YOUR DAMN HANDS OFF MY BROTHER IN LAW!” I holler, firing an impact shot into yet another guy’s chest and sending him crashing into another group. Do I do this move too much? No… no. No I do not.

“Your WHAT?! DID YOU *MARRY* LUFFY?!” Ace shrieks, spinning around and grabbing me by the shoulders with his eyes bugged out of his head.

Oh. Haha, oops. At least I finally remembered to tell him!

“...Surprise!” Luffy yells belatedly, leaping over our heads to jump kick a sword-wielding Marine.

“You kept distracting me with your death seeking tendencies and I kept forgetting to tell you, so really it’s your fault you didn’t know until now,” I state evenly, letting myself get shaken around while still firing potshots into the enemy.

Then I spot, of all goddamn people, Monkey D. Garp poking his head out of the wreckage Luffy booted him into.

“WHY DIDN’T ANYONE TELL ME I HAD A GRANDKID-IN-LAW?!” Garp hollers, looking genuinely furious. “AND IT JUST *HAD* TO BE ANOTHER PIRATE?!”

Oh my god I FORGOT MARRYING INTO THIS FAMILY WOULD COME WITH *MONKEY D.* ***FUCKING GARP—***

This is a problem for future Ed, not current Ed. Moving swiftly along.

“THIS IS CHEATING!” Ace accuses.

“EXCUSE YOU I WOULD NEVER!” I immediately refute. “BUT WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU REFERRING TO.”

“I CAN’T DIE BEFORE GIVING A SHOVEL TALK!” Ace proclaims, as if that wasn’t the entire point.

“Better be a damn good speech, with all the time we’re gonna give you to write it!” I scoff, letting myself get tossed by Luffy at a group of Marines like a feral raccoon before Ace plucks me off their unconscious bodies.

“You scammed me. I’ve been scammed. Now I can’t die until you renew your vows, so get on with it. Right now,” he demands, trying to scowl at both me and Luffy and missing the mark by a quartermile.

“Yeah no I don’t feel like it, we renewed them like a week ago or something, it’s too soon for that,” I deny without hesitation.

“Yeah I don’t wanna do it again yet,” Luffy concurs.

“Guess you’re stuck here for the time being!” I announce gleefully.

“YOU ALREADY RENEWED THEM?!” Ace screeches. “I MISSED THE WEDDING *AND* THE FUCKING VOW RENEWAL?!”

This isn’t going as well as I thought it would.

“Girl LOCK IN!” I shout, shaking him by the shoulders. “HOMO WE GOT A WAR TO WIN! *SADDLE UP!”*

“Oh shit isn’t that—” Luffy starts, but the sudden drop in temperature is pretty much enough.

“Back up,” Ace orders, and then my entire vision is taken up by fire and steam as Ace collides head on with Aokiji’s incoming ice wall with a giant fire wall of his own.

Time is moving so damn fast now. I feel like I'm jump-cutting through a documentary or video essay, or watching a film reel warped by water damage and age. It's fighting fighting fighting, dodge duck strike, shoot deflect blast, over and over and over.

There's a loud grinding boom that only mildly registers as stimuli in my periphery but to be honest I am NOT paying any mind to that shit. At least not until—

"THIS IS WHERE YOU AND I SPLIT UP!" Whitebeard's voice booms across the battlefield. I startle to attention. "EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU! STAY ALIVE AT ALL COST! RETURN TO THE NEW WORLD IN ONE PIECE!" He rears a fist back. "I'M A REMNANT OF AN OLD ERA, THERE'S NO SHIP THAT'S GONNA CARRY ME TO THE NEW ONE!" It comes down in an echoing crack that shatters right through the heart of Marineford. *"GO ON! ALL YOU BASTARDS!"*

I have another moment of pure fascination and admiration for this man. Just… what a *guy.*

"Pops!" Ace cries from beside me.

"Uncle!" Luffy gasps from the other side.

"Fuckin' shit!" I yelp as the whole island starts shaking and rocking with the tremors the pirate is unleashing.

"Strawhat! What are you standing around for?!" Iva demands, appearing behind us with a look of urgency.

I'm distracted by that when some Marine with a metal club nearly takes my head off, and dispatch him swiftly with a forceful kick to the balls. Chivalry is a patient man's game, one of which I am decidedly not.

When I look up I've lost track of Ace for a second and nearly panic, but Luffy is right there with a grip on my wrist pulling me where I need to go. Ace is face to face with Whitebeard,

words being exchanged I can't make out over the noise.

Just before we reach him, there's a second where the air wavers and a feeling like dread sharpens. Then in a rolling wave of nothing but malice, Akainu is front and centre with a fist poised to strike Ace.

My chest turns to solid stone, and I can't even muster up the breath for a scream before Whitebeard is crashing in with an absolute *haymaker* of a punch, planting the Admiral in the ground like a weed.

There's a surge of water to the side, and Jimbei is there and sweeping Ace into our group, herding us along. "Head for the ships! Luffy, in the front!" he orders, urging us forward with a webbed hand. "You're being targeted, and the old man's wish is for you to live as long as possible!"

Ace makes a choking sound, looking over his shoulder with wide eyes and nearly making me slam into him as he stops cold. I latch onto him immediately, ready to stop this stupid fuck from running back by force if I have to.

When I glance back, I blanche. Akainu lunges right for Whitebeard, and with a vicious slash of his hand, blows half of the old pirate's face off.

Ace is staring with a look of pure guilt, conflict dressed up on his face and twisting his expression. He looks down at his shaking hands for a moment before clenching them and setting his jaw, and I squeeze his bicep harder where I'm clung on.

He looks to me, gives where Whitebeard is retaliating with a punch so fucking insane it sends that stupid son of a fuck rocketing across Marineford and striking the wall of the base so hard the damn thing *breaks in half and starts a fissure breaking through the* ***entire island,*** then tears his eyes away and keeps moving forward.

There's a half second where I'm distracted with relief at him turning around, and that's when it gets me.

A Vice Admiral managed to slip through the horde of people around us, and between one blink and the next, has some kind of giant baton swinging right for my head. I barely have the time to bring my hands up in an instinctive block before it's smashing into my forearm.

It sends a jarring shockwave of *youch* through my entire left arm up to the shoulder, but my other hand has already got my pistol up and firing an impact shot into his chest. He gets shunted back with the force of it, and before I can think better of it, my left hand is shooting out to punch him hard across the jaw.

It sends another wave of harsh static up the arm, but I'm more preoccupied catching another swing from his baton off my right pistol guard. He bears down on it *hard,* my hand straining to keep from slipping and shaking from the effort. Against my better judgement, I punch him across the face again. And again. And again. *And again.*

Something fucking *gives* in my arm, and I know in an instant it's broken. *I don't motherfucking stop.*

Another two punches is all it takes, and I finally rattle his skull enough his grip on the baton thing slips and I shunt it off to the side. I shove my right pistol directly up under his jaw, and fire into his head.

Not stopping has a consequence, and that's massive amounts of pain, incredibly enough.

"Shit—" I choke, fumbling my pistol as keeping my fingers clenched becomes too painful to bear. Oh that is SO much worse than the wrist I broke during Enies Lobby what the FUCK.

A hand swipes my gun off the ground and shoves it back into my holster, and then Ace is there with an arm around my shoulders pushing me down and ducking over my head as a nearby explosion blows chunks of debris toward us. Luffy rushes in and bats the largest chunks away, jumping into the path of anyone who tries to get close and orbiting us like a mobile turret.

I hunch over with a scream hissed through gritted teeth, hand keeping my arm tucked close to my chest as I literally feel the bone rub against itself. Holy fucking Christ, it feels like the damn thing is about to stab through the sides of my arm.

"Ed! Are you alright?!" Ace asks panickedly, head up and on guard while we spend a moment stationary in the exact situation you do not want to be stationary in.

"Son of a disconsulate fuck, OW!" I gasp in a bit-off whine. *"Fuck,* keep moving, I'm ok!"

"UH, I don't think you are, but whatever you say!" he responds, sending a blast of fire off to the side and pulling me forward still cradled in the bend of his arm. We make it maybe ten steps before the air is pierced by a familiar, abhorred laugh.

Me and Ace both stiffen to stone in a unit, heads snapping back to where it seems Blackbeard has finally arrived on the island with his crew of prisoners in tow.

How is he here ***earlier?***

"That bastard," I grit out. "That *rat fucking bastard!"*

Ace's hand tightens around my shoulder as he takes a single deep breath before turning us frontwards once more and pushing forward with renewed vigour. The continued controlled breathing and the audible grinding of his teeth betray how much *effort* it's taking him to do this, but he does it regardless.

The words that soulless monstrosity is speaking don't register, aren't relevant, and I do my best to keep it that way lest something he says set my bitchass off into another mindless and idiotic attack that won't result in anything good.

There's a dull rumble beneath our feet, and that's all the warning we get before the plaza behind us blows skyhigh.

Ok that's a bit of an exaggeration, the entire thing doesn't explode into smithereens or anything, but there's a cacophony of consecutive explosions littered across the area that throw the entire place into complete anarchy.

"Holy mother of god," Ace curses under his breath, gaping at the display.

I stare at it for a long second before gently closing my own mouth. "Oh. Yeah that was definitely Sabo," I say faintly. "Guess that's the surprise tool that'll help us later."

"Sabo is here?!" Ace questions, swivelling to me with wide eyes.

I squint at him judgingly. "No shit? You think he'd just sit this one out? Fucking dumbass."

In the chaos of the explosions, we miss the beginnings of the fight between Whitebeard and Teach. I see glimpses of it through the billows of smoke, and it's nothing I'd want to be in the middle of in a million years.

"This is too much, this really is *way* too much," Ace mutters lowly, still moving us forward while the entourage fights around us and he sends off the occasional torrents of flame.

I have a beautiful and terrible realization.

"You living here won't make your life worth more," I speak, blinking slowly as I turn to Ace.

He whips down to stare at me with an ugly clash of emotions. "What?" he chokes out.

"It won't add any value to you as a person if you survive," I continue. "Your worth isn't defined by your death and it won't change a single inch of what you are; loved so beyond measure assigning you a value seems childish."

“Ed—” he gulps haltingly.

I shake my head, hand drifting from my broken arm to where his own is still curled around my shoulder. “No. You listen to me. It won’t give your life more meaning if you survive this. It won’t absolve you of whatever crimes you think you committed. It won’t change a damn thing about your worth, but — but *goddamnit!* We want you to live anyway!”

Ace blinks rapidly, his lower lip pinching up as his eyes go glassy. “You can’t just say shit like that,” he complains wetly. I barrel onwards.

“Even though it won’t change your value, or make the world forgive you, or make you more than you are right now, we want you to stay anyway.” I give him a wobbly smile, barely more put together than he is. “You know why? Because we fucking *love you,* and love doesn’t know this arbitrary points system you think your life depends on. Love holds no scales and love knows no limits it’s unwilling to press.”

Ace gives me a look somewhere between disbelief, awe, and relief; a cocktail of feelings removing the need for a proper response.

Of course, that moment gets vaporised to dust when a voice rises above the cacophony with the full force of a thousand storms, throaty and unmovable and *vast.*

Whitebeard shouts for the entire world to hear, and it feels like nothing ever said before it.

“THE ONE PIECE IS REAL!”

Knowing it’s coming doesn’t change a damn thing about my reaction. The agony in my arm is nothing compared to the rush of chills that blows through me at the words, breathless and awestruck even with missing the rest of the speech.

Knowing what comes after doesn't make that any easier either. Whitebeard's body is still where we can see him despite all the smoke in the air. And that's just what it is, his body. His coat slips from his shoulders and even from here we can see his broad back, unmarked save for the tattoo he and Ace have in common, upright and entirely unmovable.

Ace's breath hitches and pauses for a long moment. Grief is palpable where our skin meets. With a waver and a stutter, his breathing resumes, choked by tears and bereavement.

I can't say anything. It seems neither can he.

I see Ace's arm raise haltingly slow in my periphery, feel the deep and stuttering breath he takes where he's pressed against me, then watch with eyes wide open as a column of flame encases Whitebeard's body.

"He said cremation, and I'm obligated to deliver!" Ace proclaims with a waver, sniffing roughly.

Oh. Oh, he asked him. Earlier when they were talking, he asked.

"NO!" Blackbeard yowls, sounding for all the world like a creature attempting an escape from hell. Or more accurately, being kicked in the face back down into the abyss.

I flinch like I've been fucking struck, the sound worse than nails on a chalkboard and twice as painful. There's something primal and duplicitous and downright fucking *evil* in the way the word is spoken, and I feel like I've committed some great treason against the universe for simply having heard it.

I make eye contact with Luffy where he's right in front of us, and I can see that same feeling in his face.

The actual words Teach is using as he continues to spit in rage and seethe in screams are lost on me, like hearing someone curse rapidly in a language you don't know. I tighten my grip on

Ace's arm and then slip out from under it with something like anticipation, like implicit fear and the tensing before a predator strikes.

Then Sengoku is on him and it's not my problem. He comes in SWINGING, huge and golden and hitting with more force than a battering ram. I get a second to thank GOD he wasn't using that kind of back strength against us before hell is back on our doorstep and gnawing at our ankles.

"Christ," I curse, then push Ace towards Luffy. "GO!" I shout, and then we're full tilt sprinting again.

The second, the actual fucking *second* we get our feet back to booking for the ships, a voice booms from nearly right behind us like the final toll of a bell.

"YOU STILL WON'T ESCAPE HERE!" Akainu bellows, bloody and covered in soot but still advancing like an avalanche with twice as much intention to kill.

Cold focus slides in like a puzzle piece snapping into place. When he reopens his big fat mouth, our feet still flying across uneven ground in our loose line, I'm so fucking ready.

"Whitebeard—" he begins.

"I AGREE! HE *WAS* PRETTY FINE FOR AN OLD MAN!" I shout over him with lung capacity that at this point I've gotta be borrowing from some liminal space, because it sure as fuck isn't *mine.*

Ace and Luffy laugh loudly in front of me. Akainu makes a gnarled sound of rage.

"What?! No! Whitebeard—!" he tries again.

“YOU’RE RIGHT! IT *WAS* WEIRD THAT HE HAD A MUSTACHE INSTEAD OF A BEARD!” I holler over him.

My boys continue to laugh. Akainu is getting closer. Too close.

Ace is still laughing, but I can hear the edge of panic in his voice and can see his eyes darting between people and measuring distances.

No no no, I think, I scream, I rail against the fabric of the universe.

But I see it all playing out right in front of my fucking face.

Luffy is faltering, exhaustion finally catching up to him. The tip of his stupid goddamn sandal catches on the shattered stone of the battlefield. His eyes are wide like he can’t grasp what’s happening, but I’ve eaten shit on too many unforgiving floors to mistake what it is for a millisecond.

Ace sees it too. I see Ace see it too. I see Ace see it and decide what it is. I see Ace decide what will happen next.

I can see it all.

I can see Luffy bashing his knees off the ground. I can see Akainu’s fist descending like a meteor. I can see Ace throwing himself directly between the two, I can see myself a single step too far from him, I can see magma punching straight through Ace’s sternum like a pencil through paper, I can see the heatwaves and the blood and the grit teeth and the refusal to process and the glazed eyes and the *horror* and—

One way to interpret tragedy is this: tragedy exists on the basis that there is no version of the story where things work out better because there is no version of the characters that make different choices without you fundamentally altering parts of how they work.

You can't fix a story without destroying the delicate balance of the cast's personalities and beliefs, without profoundly twisting their core tenants. The inherence of tragedy is that things *could* be different, things are always *so close* to being different, but they never will be because the characters will never make different choices.

You're the one who picked up the book knowing it was a tragedy. Did you ever really want the characters to come out unscathed if the simple act of you reading is what brings them to their end? That's the tragedy: just like the characters, with your actions and of your own free will, you do it to yourself.

There is no version of the story where Romeo or Juliette don't drink the poison. There is no version of the story where Katniss doesn't volunteer for Prim. There is no version of the story where Ace doesn't turn around to save his brother. But—

But.

But there is the version of the story with *me in it.* The version where *I'm here.*

I can see it all.

*And **I'm here .***

My vision snaps back into place with such ferocity I lurch backwards, backwards away from where Luffy is tripping, backwards away from the freedom of the open ocean, away from where my crew and family are waiting, away from where *Coin* is waiting, backwards *towards Akainu.*

Please no, is all I can think, *just this one thing. Can I keep this one thing, just this once? The future can go back to being cruel, fate can string us up and reality can crash down on our heads, the powerful play can go on, but right now — just this once can I be selfish without recourse?*

I'm reeling. My brain is moving at speeds my body and processing ability can't keep up with. My mouth drops wide open and I fucking ***scream.***

The sound that filters through my ears is practically inhuman, it barely registers it's coming from me. My throat feels like it could rip open and give out, torn absolutely ragged from the abuse it's suffered. I taste blood, feel it thick and cloying from my tongue and down down down.

But.

But there's a half moment where the world holds its breath, and it does it *for me.*

There's a falter, a singular seconds long flinch in the Admiral, and I know with the undying certainty of a desperate man I just willed my opening into existence.

I've already missed the opportune moment, it's already dead and gone, there's not enough clearance between Ace's back and Akainu's strike.

But. But it hasn't hit yet.

I don't hesitate. With no reservations to the pain of it, I ram my left shoulder into the molten lava of Akainu's fist. Fuck my broken arm, fuck the fact it's easily the size of my torso, fuck the fact it's *molten fucking lava,* I put my entire body weight and more into the move — unstoppable force meets unmovable object, and *I fucking win.*

It's not even hot. Or maybe it's just so hot it doesn't hurt. Maybe the heat has fried all of my nerves and pain receptors before they can even register it. Maybe that's a good thing.

It's probably not.

The blow veers off course. Liquid rock fuzes to my shoulder and abruptly rips away. Fabric melts, blood boils, skin bubbles and blisters.

It's torture, it's anguish, it's excruciating and agonizing and any other synonym you can pull out of a thesaurus. It's pain beyond the scope of words, searing and torrid and *awful.*

It's being thrust to the verge of oblivion and held over the edge by a fist in your hair. It's being beaten black and blue and one punch away from a knockout. It's being held underwater with the last bit of air escaping and your head threatening to explode.

Ace doesn't make it out unscathed. I don't know if it was some ping of Haki, sense memory of someone at your back, something in his periphery or just my action itself, but he started turning around.

I'm not a shield, I'm not a wall; I'm a deflector and a battering ram and a mirror. The knuckles of Akainu's fist drag across Ace's ribs in a deep, ugly smear. The air is acrid with the stench of burning *everything.*

It hurts. *Fuck* it hurts.

Luffy is on the ground, staring up in unrestrained horror in a near mirror of Sabaody. Ace is half collapsed forward already, twisted so I can see the bright-eyed fear and pain overtaking his face.

There's a beat where I almost believe I'm going to stay on my feet. Gravity sways forward without me, I stumble a step forward to catch it. I take another without conscious input, and that one takes me crumbling to a jarred knee.

Breathing is hard. It's so hard. I can't stand the *fucking smell,* it's going to take *effort* to brave barbeque if I ever smell it again, so I'm left with only my mouth to draw breath in and out. It feels like someone's taken a hot poker to my lungs and poured molten silver into the puncture, shiny bright and sharp with the pain. I feel like I'm fucking boiling from the inside outwards. I'm panting and instead of air, blood is pouring out.

Unfortunately, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

I'm everywhere. I'm nowhere. I'm scattered to atoms in the scale of it and sandblasted smooth in its wake. It's all a faded veneer of black and white, time viewed through a cheesecloth or black stockings, and losing vision has never quite scared me in the same way. I'm fighting dirty and rabid with my nails and teeth, pulling hair and scratching at soft spots, desperate to steal second after second of consciousness if it's the last thing I do.

I want it more than I've wanted anything in my life. *God,* I want to stay right here where I can see Ace and Luffy. It's not enough, right? This can't be the full extent of damage I can take. I don't want to die.

But—

Everything freezes into a crystalline snapshot. The world captured in a vignette, a simulacrum, a freeze frame.

I don't waste this mercy to thank whatever granted me it, I don't waste it by focusing on the unfiltered panic and unreserved terror on the faces of the people I love. I do what feels most natural.

I smile.

I smile like it's the easiest thing in the world, eye creasing but not cheek stretching, warm and adoring and poignant and *human.*

I use my moment of mercy to try and convey everything I'm feeling right now, all of the relief and the fierce protectiveness and the sheer satisfaction and pride in my action. I smile, and it's all the thank you's and the wishes for something better, the apologies and the reprimands, the sentiments unexpressed and the points not argued.

I have whole sonnets, chronicles, epics, *sagas* I would weave into existence for them. So many words unspoken and unheard, it's hard to choose what few to use.

But — I know what I want them to know the most.

My mouth moves. My tongue forms syllables, my vocal chords cooperate, my teeth sing and everything aligns enough for speech.

But instead of the few words I wanted to say, all that comes choking up out of my lips alongside another mouthful of blood is—

"Fucking hell."

And that's about the time I feel something inside me snap, and the universe shatters in a starburst of colour and light, the last firework on New Year's Eve. Black rushes in like it's hungry, surging up to meet me as the stars collapse inward and the world goes dark.

It's like falling out of the sky, an asteroid burning into the atmosphere and extinguishing, and my last thought is of Luffy.

Chapter End Notes

Teehee?

Lmao burn victim.

Anyway.

E D. "I WILL MILK THIS TITLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH" Domino vs the World Government's refusal to acknowledge their shit fight to the death cagematch four rounds in the ring no survivors.
E D. "You interrupted my honeymoon for this shit" Domino vs Portgas D. "YOU DIDN'T MAKE ME YOUR MAID OF HONOUR" Ace fight to the death cagematch

four rounds in the ring no survivors.
E. D. “Ace and Sabo are my brothers-in-law now and I will make so many jokes about this” Domino vs Monkey D. “CLOSE ENOUGH, FOURTH GRANDKID TO MAKE A MARINE IT IS” Garp fight to the death cagematch four rounds in the ring no survivors.

LOVE YOU GUYS SEE YOU IN TWO WEEKS BYEEE ♥♥♥

Chapter 134: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Four: Heaven Is A Long Way, Even If You Save My Soul

Chapter Summary

Heaven Is A Long Way - Divorce

Something just changed and Coin doesn't know what it was.

Chapter Notes

Alright gang this last stretch/arc or whatever is just gonna be me punching you in the gut repeatedly, over and over again, at various intensities with various flavours. You'll love it. Have fun!

Gasp also we have a tentative final chapter count! I'll get around to putting this in a series so there's easy access when I put up the sequel and the timeskip thing, definitely sometime before the final chapter, so you can subscribe to that too whenever I do.

Shoutout my friend who finally got around to reading this and now has this assfuckery as their first up to date chapter. Honey pookie darling I am so sorry.

ANYWAY who's ready for some fucken 3rd person POV baybe we're SO BAAAAAAAAAAAAACKKKKKKK !!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Coin is anxious. He's self aware and secure enough to admit that.

It isn't that he doesn't have faith Ed will pull through, or that they'll make whatever decisions they think are best, or even that they'll be able to accomplish whatever goals they've settled on, it's just—

Well it's a lot, isn't it?

Ed is one person. An apparently quite capable one, and one he has nothing but love, awe and implicit belief in *and* for, but still one person. At the very least the only person who knows the full extent of what they're fighting against, as Coin doesn't believe for a single goddamn second they would rely on anyone else to bear the burden of this particular kernel of knowledge.

For not the first time and certainly not the last, Coin vehemently wishes he was there helping them.

"Your thinking is distracting from my reading," Gloriosa grumbles, but when he glances to the side she's still nose deep in the newspaper she's been flipping through since they both sat down on the balcony high upon the caldera wall of Amazon Lily.

Coin doesn't respond. They may have finally settled down into something civil, but Coin knows himself, and knows he's always one word away from pissing people off. It's why he hadn't said anything about the single deck chair either, and took Gloriosa claiming it without complaint.

He shifts slightly on the wooden flooring and finds his eyes automatically drifting out to the same spot on the horizon that's been drawing his focus. His crossed legs are starting to ache a little from the prolonged position of his vigil (he is NOT a young man anymore YEESH), but he doesn't break his semi-meditation quite yet.

It could be minutes, could be hours later when Coin abruptly stills.

Gloriosa looks up from her paper, noting the change in the line of his shoulders and the way his breathing has gone from deep and purposeful to nearly impossible to discern. "Wind's changed," she mutters, eyes flickering to the horizon. "Tides, too."

Amazon Lily has no wind. Or tides. They're smack dab in the middle of the Calm Belt.

"Ed is fine," Coin says unconvincingly.

He doesn’t turn, hands twitching where they rest on his knees. The uncertainty is uncharacteristic, but he can’t really help it.

Something just changed and Coin doesn’t know what it was.

“Of course,” Gloriosa concedes. Coin gives an aborted half-nod. Gloriosa can see he’s bitten his lip or cheek so hard a drop of blood rolls down his chin.

There’s a long moment of silence as they both eye the skyline, cloudless and cerulean as far as anyone ordinary could see. Coin doesn’t comment or inquire if her thoughts are on her own charge — if he’s perfectly honest, he can only think of his own.

“I don’t even know how they take their coffee,” he blurts, immediately feeling stupid for it.

Gloriosa regards him for a long moment, expression static and eyes keen, before she settles further into her chair and flicks out her newspaper with a sigh.

“You’ll learn,” she states evenly, and it’s the kindest thing she’s ever said to him.

———

Rayleigh has sat vigil in the fringes of Sabaody’s main square watching the live Transponder feed since the cameras had started rolling, so he knows exactly what the heady and dense feeling of smoke and miasma that settles thickly over his shoulders means.

Most of the archipelago’s inhabitants have begun migrating to the far side of the groves for fear of the possible tsunamis that may or may not be headed their way, so it’s just him and the stragglers stupid or brave enough to chance it left.

“Not looking good,” he mutters to himself, frowning and running a thumb over the bars of his facial hair.

He spares a thought for Coin, as he often does, and considers his options. He doesn't have a specific direction, or a specific purpose just yet, but if Coin's pedantic ramblings over the years have taught him anything—

Well. Mentorship is a hat, or something.

Something he best consult Shakky about.

…

Shakky, on the other side of the island, puts down the cup she was polishing.

"Is everything ok?" Camie asks, the young mermaid looking up from where she's had her chin buried in her crossed arms with a cocked head.

Shakky waves a hand. "Ah, don't you worry. It's nothing," she dismisses, slowly placing her rag down beside the cup. She keeps her eyes pinned on the door for a beat, then the window. "Some bad weather seems to be rolling in."

"Worse than that rumbling from earlier?" Camie questions in concern.

Shakky breaks her gaze with the outside sky to pick her glass and rag back up. "Whole different kind of storm," she hums lowly. "Might be for the best if Hatchan heals up sooner rather than later, and we all head to the Strawhat's ship before it arrives."

Camie makes a confused noise.

"No telling who caused this one until it gets here. Better we keep guard and relatively out of its path safely than caught up in it and sorry," Shakky murmurs, tucking the glass back onto

its shelf.

“I guess,” Camie mumbles, still sounding confused.

Shakky chuckles. “You go and check on Hatchan now, hm? No use in dawdling.”

“Alright…” Camie concedes, shooting Shakky one last confused/concerned look before ducking into the back room.

Shakky thumbs the edge of the letter Domino gave her with one hand, tapping the shellac of her nails onto the bartop with the other. “Whole different storm indeed,” she mutters to herself, then purposefully turns away from the door.

———

Vivi looks up from the book balanced in her lap with a furrow already between her brows and a frown already perched on her lips. “Did you…” she begins to ask before stopping short.

“...Did I..?” Cobra parrots back after a beat passes without her continuing.

Vivi shakes her head lightly. “Ah, sorry. For a second I thought… — ah, nevermind. Sorry,” she mumbles out lamely, gently closing her book as her frown deepens.

Cobra hums consideringly, flipping the cover of his own book shut. They’re both sitting in armchairs in the library, taking a moment to simply spend time in each other’s presence while Cobra has a break in his kingly duties.

“How odd. Would you like to try parsing through it?” he offers. There’s a breeze blowing in from the large open windows, and Vivi lifts her face to it with a look of uneasy confusion.

“It was almost like someone walked over my grave, morbid as it sounds, but not quite — oh, I don’t know how to explain it,” she mutters, frustration leaking into her tone.

“Be patient with yourself. You’re putting words to a feeling, it doesn’t necessarily need to make sense to *me,”* Cobra says soothingly.

Vivi tries to shuffle some of the tension out of her shoulders. Karoo makes a concerned noise where he’s sat at her side, and she absentmindedly passes a hand along his beak. “I don’t know if there *are* words for this one,” Vivi says quietly. “It was… ominous, or *was* ominous — like the second past when you anticipated thunder after seeing lightning, and there’s still no sound.”

Cobra just looks at her for a moment, a wrinkled line cutting a trench through his forehead and making him look far older than his years. “As if you’re at the opera and you know an actor has missed the cue for their climactic moment, but the music is still swelling,” he mutters contemplatively.

Vivi turns to blink at him owlishly.

“But you know,” he continues lightly, “actors are professionals. And a good one can elevate a mistake like that into an even more impactful performance.” The look he gives Vivi is even parts comforting and expectant. “Best to have faith in them.”

After a beat, she nods in slow acceptance.

Vivi gazes out the open window with the unsettling feeling of foreboding still twisting in her stomach. “I hope you’re right,” she murmurs uneasily.

For the sake of more people than just me, she doesn’t add out loud.

———

Brook is no stranger to oddities of the soul.

He's no stranger to the way they fluctuate or the way they feel snuffing out in close proximity, from miles away, from across an ocean where you can't reach. He knows death intimately, and knows the shape of it like one would remember the shape of a lover.

Whatever the hell he just felt, *that,* he was a stranger to.

"How curious," he murmurs to himself, quiet in the dark of the round room with its silly cult paraphernalia aside from the scratch of his quill as he etches music onto the page.

The thing about spending many years in isolation followed by beat after beat excitement is this; it doesn't feel like the same pace as the other years, but it also doesn't *not.*

Those years were long, yes, and he'll probably feel the drag of it taking space in his brain (if he had one, yohohoho!) forever, but it also wasn't a lot of information. So the breakneck (yohohoho!) speed of this period of his life *does* feel longer, simply by virtue of *volume* where the information is concerned.

All that is to say: what *could* feel like a lifetime ago he told Ed that their soul was delicate, that if they weren't careful there would be consequences for that.

Ed, despite their brilliance and keenness for tactics, is not very good at taking instructions.

There's a level of uncertainty to it, and a level of doubt it would be impossible to purge from himself given any amount of lifetimes, but still. The level of unconditional faith and level of yearning hope for his *friend* is quite enough to see him through.

Hopefully.

———

Franky gets a full body shiver that starts in the ends of his hair and ends in the starts of his metal toes.

“Did it just get colder in here?” he mutters derisively, squinting behind his shades at the walls around him, accusatory like they intentionally let the winter chill in just to fuck with him. At this point he wouldn’t be surprised.

“Hm? Nope, feels the same to me,” the kid, Kitton, replies while he kicks his legs back and forth from the chair he’s perched on watching Franky work.

Franky hums low in his throat, frowning down at the open panel of his arm and putting his wrench down on the floor. “Weird. Super weird.”

“Are you gonna start acting crazy again?” Kitton questions apprehensively, tucking his feet up and putting his chin on his knees. “I can make some tea if it’ll help.”

“We both know that’s not gonna help,” he deadpans, distractedly drumming his fingers on his thigh. “I’d say I need some recalibration, but…”

Kitton cocks his head at the prolonged pause. “...But?”

Franky shakes his head. “Bah. Probably nothing. At the very least, nothing in *my* systems.”

“Well, what is it then?” Kitton asks curiously, blinking big eyes at him.

Franky stares off into the middle distance for a beat, then shrugs. “Dunno. I’ll figure it out eventually. You wanna pass me that spanner?”

“Yeah, ok!”

_____

Robin has a penchant for staying still, so it’s not the stilling, but her suddenly rising to her feet to walk a brisk line across the room and then back that draws attention.

“Erm… are, uh — is, is everything ok..?” one of the Revolutionaries ventures to ask, and the squeak they let out when she turns her eyes on them is less gratifying and more a cue for her to turn her back and face out to the window.

Robin worries her lip between her teeth, and ignores how chapped they’re likely to get because of it in this climate. The thick snow continues to fall outside, but she can still make out the distant waters and icebergs beyond the bridge.

“Robin? Are you ok?” Soran asks quietly, popping up at her side with a worried frown.

Robin smiles down at her instinctively, giving her a quick light pat on the head. “Yes, I’m fine. Thank you for asking Soran.”

The young girl brightens up and gives her a hesitant smile of her own. “Are you cold then? You suddenly looked like you were feeling the chill a lot more.”

Robin blinks slowly, then turns her gaze out the window once more. “No, I’m quite alright. You don’t need to worry about me.”

Soran nods slowly. “They said we’d be moving on again soon, so hopefully getting your blood pumping will warm you up some,” she offers optimistically.

“Yes, hopefully,” Robin hums. She’s no stranger to feelings of dread, or of being hunted or cornered, or the miasma of anxiety and unease that could keep a girl up in her bed all night.

But she's also no stranger to pushing through these feelings regardless to get the job done.

There's still more people to save on this awful bridge, so she'll put her focus on that.

Hopefully the feeling amounts to nothing, but with her track record, Robin wouldn't bet on it.

_____

Chopper is having an absolutely terrible time and has done nothing whatsoever to deserve this.

"Will you people give it up?!" he wails, trying in vain to wiggle out of the ropes tying him to the spit currently roasting him over an open fire. "Stop trying to COOK ME!"

The people of this nightmare island keep ignoring his demands, because of course they do. He supposes it'll only be a matter of time until those gigantic birds come swooping in again and he's once again being tossed to and fro like a hackysack.

Needless to say he is not enjoying his time here.

It's not *fair,* Chopper has *stuff to do,* he needs to get back to Sabaody and find his friends and he needs to apologize because even though most of it is a fuzzed out *blur* he knows he did something he *wasn't supposed to—*

Something makes Chopper's nose *twitch.*

"What was that?!" he shrieks shrilly. "Are you doing a weird ritual now?! *What was* ***that?!"***

That felt like the kind of wrong you don't feel unless there's a natural disaster coming, or like it's too late to avoid one, or like you've just done something *stupid* and now there's a natural disaster bearing down on your *head—*

Chopper starts flailing harder. "Lemme go lemme go lemme GO!" he cries frantically. In complete opposition to the fire slowly cooking him, he suddenly feels cold enough for goosebumps to erupt over every inch of him.

That, of course because nothing even remotely nice can ever happen to Chopper on this island, is when the birds descend.

As he's bouncing through the forest to the sounds of fighting behind him, still half tied up and definitely crying now, Chopper only has one thing to say.

*"I hate this STUPID ISLAND SO MUCH! THIS IS THE **WORST!"***

_____

Sanji could be having a better time, if he's being honest.

"Can I go now?" he asks, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"Like I said the first hundred times, and when you asked a minute ago, *no,"* the latest in a continual rotation of people 'keeping him company' (i.e. making sure he doesn't run off and do something stupid like try to figure out how to *sprint across water)* replies briskly. "You wanted to speak with Lady Caroline, you'll wait patiently for your appointment."

He's reconsidering his stance on the running on water thing. If Brook could do it he can brute force his way through it. Probably.

“Would you like some tea while you wait?” whatever-her-name-was asks testily, and Sanji very intentionally doesn’t point out that her wig is askew.

“Fine,” he says tightly. This has been pushing the limits of his already very *very* thin patience.

A teacup is pushed into his hands, and barely moves an inch up towards his mouth before he goes perfectly, utterly still.

The sound that creaks through him is almost entirely involuntary, as accidental as the way the cup slips from his abruptly numb fingers.

The crash and shatter sends a second jolt of freezing suffocation through him, and he’s scrambling out of his seat and reaching for pieces of shattered porcelain before he even starts breathing again.

“Oh, let me get that,” what’s-her-name gasps, and it feels very far away.

“No, I got it…” Sanji mumbles, shakier than he’d like as he pinches the rim of the largest chunk.

“Stop. You’re going to cut your hands,” she snaps, and he once again freezes in place.

What’s-her-name has gotten a dustpan, and bops his wrist with the brush handle to get him to drop his chunk in before he can blink twice.

“Was — did you…” Sanji trails off as he looks up and to the window with a harsh crease between his brows.

“Honestly, men can be so clumsy,” she tuts, ignoring his mutterings completely. “If you didn’t want tea, you could have simply refused.”

“That wasn’t it and you know it,” he retorts on instinct, drawing his focus back in forcefully with a scowl.

“Oh I’m sure it wasn’t,” she says airily, clearly dismissive. Sanji vindictively doesn’t mention the makeup smudging at the corners of her eyes. “I’d never accuse you of something so childish as breaking fine china to speed things up.”

“You’re being obtuse on purpose,” he snaps immediately.

“Aw, don’t be mean!” she whines as she moves to throw the broken cup out. She didn’t iron her dress and now it’s all crinkled up at the hem, but he’s not going to tell her that.

Whatever that was is something to worry about later. He hopes.

_____

The toe of Usopp’s shoe catches on a root and he nearly falls flat on his face. *Nearly.* As it is, he simply flails for a moment, arms pinwheeling before he finds his balance again.

“Are you alright’n?” Heracles inquires. “Usopp’n?”

Usopp isn’t even looking at him or the ground. His gaze is locked above him on the foliage, and the breaks through it that show the sky.

“Usopp’n,” Heracles repeats himself.

Usopp seems to shake out of his own head. “What? Sorry, I uh…” he trails off, eyes drifting back upwards before they snap to Heracles. “Sorry. What was the question?”

Heracles frowns at him. “I asked if you were alright’n.”

“Ah. No, I’m ok,” he says unsteadily, tugging on an errant curl with eyes trained on the sky. “I just… thought — nevermind.” He threads his fingers through the hair at the back of his neck, damp from the humid air.

“Well, you better keep’n moving and building your stamina’n, before more creatures’n come looking!” Heracles says jovially, striking a dramatic pose that emphasizes his weird beetle armour. At least the helmet is really cool. Luffy would probably love this guy.

Usopp’s hands tangle together like fishing net, his Kabuto pinched between his palms. The *last* thing he wants is more nightmare creatures, so he does as instructed and picks up the pace.

There’s already so much anxiety in his body he feels sick with it, so it’s hard to sparse out where exactly that sticky sharp feeling came from. It all just kinda mixes together after a while, he guesses.

Then there’s yet another giant creature bursting out of the foliage to swallow him whole, so he puts it out of his mind and takes off running and screaming once again.

———

Something feels odd.

Nami tears her eyes away from the sky to turn to the old man weather wizard guy as he returns from getting… something. She honestly can’t remember what he said he was getting.

He comes to a slow stop a few feet away, his jovial smile dimming a bit. “Are you quite alright, young miss?” he asks slowly, cautiously.

Nami frowns. “I, uh…” she trails off, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. “Sorry. It’s nothing,” she dismisses, but her words are uneasy as she eyes the horizon with apprehension.

“Are you feeling something on the wind? None of our instruments have picked anything up yet, but you should never ignore your instincts when it comes to weather,” he instructs, peering out the way she’s looking with a squint.

“No, no,” Nami denies, then pauses with her forehead tightening as her eyebrows pull together. “Or — no. Nothing that’ll be a problem up here, at least. I think.”

He hums consideringly, then shrugs and turns back to her and away from the sky. “No matter, then. But if you’ve got any insights, please do share!”

“Well I’ve got several about your business sense, for starters,” she snarks in an attempt to distract herself. It doesn’t really work when she still keeps her head focused forward.

The old weather wizard guy just laughs. Nami wrings her hands together. She *knows* none of the instruments picked up anything, because the first thing she had done was check her pocket barometer, and it certainly wasn’t the barometric pressure dropping that she felt.

Nami likes to push. She likes to worry at the edges of issues until they make sense. Likes to feel the edges of her puzzles for dimensions and faultlines.

Something tells her trying to unspool this one won’t do her any favours.

“Ok, what was it you were going to show me?” she asks, and intentionally puts her back to the horizon.

_____

Zoro is a creature of instinct.

Those instincts are what have kept him alive, so when a feeling like someone with a knife pressed right to your soft spots with every intention to sink in flits through his synapses, he's got his hands on his swords and dropped into a crouch in a fraction of a second.

"What is it?!" Perona shrieks in alarm, floating up higher with her umbrella brandished like a shield as the ghost girl looks around frantically.

Zoro says nothing, frowning as he examines the feeling. It's like seeing the flash of a blade through the foliage of a dark forest, stuck frozen in preparation and left on guard with hours of no follow through. Like an opponent feinting across from you but not following up with a strike.

He doesn't like it.

"What?" Perona snaps again, hackles raising at his prolonged silence. "What the hell is it?!"

Zoro slowly, forcefully, unclenches his fists from his hilts. He straightens slowly too, breathing shallowly through the pain of it because he's *better* than that damnit, and turns in a slow watchful circle.

"Annoying," he scoffs tightly.

"Are you talking to me?!" Perona demands, flying down to get in his sightline and making a noise of outrage as he ignores her to keep taking a perimeter.

"No, obviously not," he refutes in a near-snarl. "Not everything is about you."

"Why are you being so *rude?"* she huffs, crossing her arms and hooking her ankles together. "You sensing something on your idiot sonar or something? I thought you were recalibrating it

to find the sea," she snarks.

Zoro rolls his eyes at her antics and goes back to ignoring her.

"Feels like a hypocrite just jumped into their own grave," he mutters under his breath, analysing every leaf and twig of the underbrush as he drags his gaze along the ruins and treeline.

"What does that even *mean?"* she whinges, stomping a boot on thin air.

Zoro rolls out his sore shoulders and grunts noncommittally. "It means I'm going this way now."

Perona squawks as he starts marching again. "Wha — I told you that was the wrong way like two minutes ago! HEY! DON'T IGNORE ME, DAMNIT!"

———

Luffy does not wake slowly.

He doesn't wake up with a crash or a bang, either. Luffy's eyes flicker open with little fanfare, somewhere unfamiliar surrounded by unfamiliar sounds and smells.

For a long steady moment Luffy is nothing, brain not fully awake and thoughts not in order, shallow breaths accompanied by the steady beep of a monitor.

The moment shutters.

The moment curls up in a ball, shuddering apart like a poorly assembled card house. The moment dies screaming as the steady beeping shrieks off into the discordant wail of an untuned trumpet, a dented-in gong, a punched-through drum—

There's something wrong. There's something wrong wrong *wrong* and Luffy doesn't know what but it's too quiet and it's too cold and something isn't there where it's supposed to be and it's just wrong *wrong* ***wrong WRONG—***

The sound he makes is barely human. Maybe it isn't human at all. Maybe any shred of his humanity danced beyond the thick black veil where the thing that's missing has dared to travel.

There's the distant foggy sense of people yelling, at him or about him is anyone's guess, but that has been so much of his life lately it hardly stands out. But it's not the yelling he's *expecting,* it's not yelling in any flavour it *should be,* none of the voices are the people he *wants to hear.*

There's nothing familiar, nothing for him to grasp onto, there's nobody sleeping pressed right up against him in odd angles and tangled up in nice textured blankets — just cold air, seething pain, and so much fucking noise that *will not SHUT UP—*

There's something he needs to find. There's something he's supposed to be doing.

Luffy is in a kind of pain he hasn't felt before. That's saying a lot, because Luffy has been in *a lot* of pain, but this feels like the kind of pain people don't get back up from.

Luffy will though. He can bounce back from anything if he throws himself against it hard enough, that's what Ed says, and—

Something he's supposed to be doing.

Ace. Ed. Where's Ed?

Another one of those purely inhuman sounds rips through him, feels like it does more damage on its way out, feels like something *escaping,* something trying to leave him to *seek.*

Luffy is very familiar with stretching, for obvious reasons. Every piece of him feels poised to *snap,* to break into sharp vectors without regard for whoever is caught in the danger zone, pulled so taught whatever is left of him won't ever return to the same shape again and where the *fuck is* ***Ed—***

The moment slams down on him *hard,* a 30 foot mallet right to the sternum and a sleepy kiss to the temple all the same, and the harsh scrape of ***WRONG*** crowds in like deep water pressure around his head.

"Ed..?" he manages to croak though a mouth so numb it's probably not his.

The moment snares its teeth into him with ripping severity that *damages.* The moment slices and drags *ruthlessly,* yanks him over the brink into the neverending *black,* and—

There's no one to drag him back.

Chapter End Notes

What if I just didn't answer any of your burning questions at all lmao. What then. Literally what.

This chapter was honestly so fun because it was just me getting to describe the same feeling a million different ways and tailor it to the different characters and I was having a BLAST. It also somehow, by a literal miracle I'm assuming, might be the chapter with the least swear words in the entire fic and it ABSOLUTELY is because it's not in Ed's POV. I didn't even do that on purpose and that makes it so much funnier.

So anyway THE MUSIC. My love for this band CANNOT be overstated, they're one of my favourites ever and I have cried so many tears to this EP you couldn't hope to dry

them all up with a mop. This is just so infused with the feeling of hearing your dad leave for work so early it's still dark outside, and it coexists in this beautiful spot in my head where the memory of listening to it in a car with my friends driving in a snowstorm on New Years Eve lives. Go listen to their entire discography PLEASE. If you take any of my music recommendations, take this one. Their first actual album dropped in March and I have Not Been Normal about it since. Like Hangman is about Coin and Ed, that song is literally about them. Banger after banger after banger. Heady Metal is a no skip EP and I feel it's worth noting I have an approximate combined 12,635 mins of listen time for this band over the course of two and a half years. So. I am an unbiased judge here obviously.

ALSO NEW TØP ALBUM ANNOUNCED??? I am not going to be normal about this, and that is a promise. I am just warning you now. If you aren't in on the tøp lore I both pity and envy you a great deal.

Chapter 135: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Five: Afforded A Second Birth

Chapter Summary

0898 Heartache - Los Campesinos!

It’s like getting slammed in the back with the full weight of a Honda.

Chapter Notes

Ok it may be called One Piece but I'm gonna leave you in several by the time I'm done with you.

The depression has in fact been depressioning, and I've been having ✨mental and emotional issues✨ related to my meds but BITCH if that could stop me GOD WOULDN'T BE SO AFRAID. So we continue to hustle through it.

Y'all I am so not a doctor... I am an idiot who almost failed science twice you must always remember that... So all my doctor and med student readers and such I am so sorry for the ways this shit will make you cringe. I have no idea what I'm doing. Google tried but by god was I not strong enough. Also y'all I am not actually religious... there do be talk about god and organized religion in this one tho.

Alright who's ready for a fucken fever dream of a chapter!!! I am very excited for this one!!! Let's go yeehaw wahoo yippie!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What a waste.”

An imagined huff of breath, the illusion of indignance, a lightning-flash crackle of sense in the absence of sense.

“All that time spent planning, so much setup and fine tuning, hell even a trial run, and still.”

Taste to someone with no tongue, sight to a blind man, a phantom limb snapping in agency it no longer possesses.

*"And the game was over so **quick.** I thought this would last at least twice as long!"*

Whining, it would be grief if it wasn't so uninvested, and the detached disappointment of watching your selected horse lose on the race track.

I—

Wait—

What was I..?

***"Is no part of this fault yours?"** another voice asks, and it's a jolt right through the system.*

It's a hard reboot that feels like cold water splashed right into the hardware, a punch in the head for a cognitive reset, a shot of pure adrenaline after a crash.

"The Princeling does as the Princeling does, as you see and as you know," the first… not-voice sighs, glum.

It's chimes, a triangle taking centre stage, the choral voices of a thousand songbirds taking flight at once.

***"Is the authentic experience not what you were after?"** the other voice continues to question.*

A symphonic rising, the opening of an opera, not a triangle but an accompaniment of trumpets in imperfect synchronization.

"I'm accepting of the outcome," the not-voice grumbles. "And there's no ***fault,*** *everything is as it is and always has and will be."*

"Was it not your intention—"

"Wait," the not-voice interrupts.

A beat. A flicker of flame hot nerve activation. The burn of static as blood rushes into an asleep limb to wake it. Everything on the left and something on the right turning on at once.

"Is..?" *the other voice starts, soft, gentle, almost* ***reverent*** *in cadence.*

The not-voice makes a sharp noise-not-noise of shock, and then the void lights up in ***white.***

_____

It's like getting slammed in the back with the full weight of a Honda.

I gasp in a breath like it's killing me, loud and wheezy and *painful,* eyes shooting open as my back arcs hard off whatever surface I'm on like every piece of my spine contracted at once.

"...rab the..!" someone shouts, but it's buzzing in and out like — as always — shitty radio connection.

Everything is white hot *agony,* pain beyond reason and it can't truly count as *consciousness* when there's nothing but *hurt* to be conscious of.

“...ose them agai..!”

There’s hands that burn like iron brands grabbing and pushing and holding me down and I don’t thrash against them — fuck I don’t think I could move that much if I wanted to — but I’m sure as fuck not *happy* about it and the hands sure as fuck *know.*

“...et me the adrena..!”

A sound, shrill and reedy in an unsteady staccato, screams out an arpeggio that pulses through the fucking *air, mean* in the way it demands attention and submission.

“...you son of a *bitch..!”*

Yeah ok even through the pain that one remains a constant I am *not* gonna be arguing against any time soon. Homegirl they are setting my fucking grey matter on fire with their *mind.* I don’t even know who they *refers to* in this scenario.

There’s another gust of breath that goes in and out of me like a bellows and there’s a second of clarity that I grasp for with all my might, fingers slick with the vast empty black of the void and something thicker like blood, but it slips before I can even make sense of it.

It’s a flash of thinking in rapid order.

Do you believe in god? Do you want to change your opinion about that very quickly? Do you want something to be waiting for you on the other side?

Make your list, check your boxes, get all your facts in order before they make order of you.

The glimpse of reality is short and it hurts and it's confusing, but that staccato hymn evens out into a drawling hum even as the shouts get louder, and then I don't have to worry about it any more as I slip back down into the expanse of space with a name like a hallelujah on my lips.

———

It's the soft sound of rock music that registers first, in the end.

There's a single step taken forward before the ability to step even exists, circumventing evolution with an instinct not yet developed, and when my foot meets solid ground everything takes shape around me.

It's a starburst of colour and sensation — walls painted a pale and slightly cracked yellow, light and a breeze dancing in from an open window, a blue, grey and beige shag carpet more soft than it looks and thick beneath my socks and — her.

I look behind myself. Shoes that shouldn't be are lined up neatly at the edge of the carpet, worn and weathered combat boots that aren't missing half the pair in a lightning-burnt pile of nothing. Fingers I didn't notice creeping up to my shoulder meet butter-smooth leather and the edge of a shirt. I glance down and blink slowly at the jacket and yellow plaid underneath — whole and unaltered — both earned from my grandfather, and one specific pair of my multitude of black cargo pants, existing impossibly in the state they are.

I look back to her. I can feel my hair brushing the tops of my ears. A glancing press of my fingers finds the scarred notch in my eyebrow, the nearly imperceptible imperfect straightness of my nose after too many breaks. An impossible combination of things in the same place.

She's sitting on a bed pressed against the wall with the open window, hair a shifting brown curtain tucked behind one ear, turned away from me and facing the window. There's a book resting open in her lap, crossed legs in pants of linen and arms relaxed in a shirt loose around the neckline with some kind of logo too faded to discern.

I cross the room to her in slow, measured steps, sinking onto the half of the bed she doesn't occupy and tucking one leg under my weight and my chin onto the knee of the other, curled tight on the navy expanse of the comforter.

I watch her face for a long moment, memorizing the shape of her eyes and the curve of her nose, the moles and beauty marks so alike and unlike my own, the shape of her brows settled in something resembling peace.

I have to see her mouth moving before the words come, but when they do…

"...I wake earlier, now that birds have come and sing in the unfailing trees. On a cot by an open window I lie like land used up, while spring unfolds," her voice intonates, gentle in tone and slightly mumbled like she means to please no audience. "Now of all voyagers I remember, who among them did not board ship with grief among their maps? — Till it seemed men never go somewhere, they only leave wherever they are, when the dying begins."

I turn, softly, to look out the window and see what she's seeing. There's a shoreline in the distance, beyond a few houses and some greenery, trees poking up in vain to try hiding the shifting sparkle of near-sunset water.

"For myself, I find my waning life implores no novelty and no disguise of distance; where, in what country, might I put down these thoughts, who still am citizen of this fallen city?" she continues, and I watch her eyes track across the skyline.

She's a striking figure like this, worn soft by her words or the room or the music, and painted gold by the light streaming in. She doesn't even glance down at the page as her finger glides down words, she speaks like she couldn't forget the words if she tried. Like they're song lyrics she's memorized by accident and will never truly forget again.

"On a cot by an open window, I lie and remember while the birds in the trees sing of the circle of time. Let the dying go on, and let me, if I can, inherit from disaster before I move," she recites, slightly choked and curling around the edges, like her hair. "O, I go to see the great ships ride from harbor, and my wounds leap with impatience; yet I turn back to sort the weeping ruins of my house:" she has to take a deep, slightly stuttered breath, "here or nowhere I will make peace with the fact."

I continue watching her for a beat, then switch my gaze to watch out the window as she does.

"Where are we?" I question.

My sister shifts minutely, not reacting with any kind of surprise. "Charlottetown, PEI," she answers evenly, not turning from her view.

"What were you reading?" I ask next.

She finally turns away from the sky and looks me straight in the eye. It almost surprises me she can. She lifts the book from her lap to show me. "Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver," she grants easily. "The poem is called No Voyage."

The book is open nearly to the end, brightly coloured strips of paper or sticky notes scattered throughout it betray the annotations. I never knew her to be a fan of poetry. I voice as much.

The smile she gives me is wry in self-deprecating humor. "I've been doing lots of reading as of late."

The faint sound of a rock song I don't know off the top of my head fades in transition before a familiar song starts to play. The opening synth notes of Alphaville's Forever Young have my sister's head tilting to the side before locking back on me.

She sighs, melancholic, and reaches out slowly to cup my cheek. "I'd say this is about you, but…" Her thumb traces a path through the hollow of my cheek. "You've grown so much," she chokes out, eyes watering.

"Says you," I squeeze back, throat tight with the sudden sting in my own.

*And I mean that — her hair is so much longer, the wave of it much more defined, there's shallow wrinkles clinging to the corners of her eyes and I don't know what put them there. Even before — everything, I didn't see her very often, what with her moving out while I was still sloughing through high school. And then **after —** everything, she wasn't exactly chomping at the bit to see me, so.*

It's been a while.

*"What're you doing in **PEI?"** I ask so I don't start ugly crying.*

My sister's face cracks into a smile like she can't help it. "My fiancé's family lives here," she says wistfully, "we're visiting. And, ah, maybe house hunting. Depending on what's available."

It's almost like a blow to the chest. Reading poetry, being engaged, moving to PEI, it's all things entirely disconnected from the memory of my sister. And yet…

I smile at her and it feels genuine. "Really?"

Her returning grin is proof enough. "Really. And, ah…" she trails off with a flicker of hesitation, the hand on my cheek curling its fingers in as her knuckles drag down to rest on my knee. "My fiancé, we're also in town for his sister's graduation."

I blink slowly. "Alright..?"

*"Her name's Zoey," she starts, fingers playing along with the beat. "She picked it herself. And — and she's been helping a lot, with pronouns and stuff like that, and we went to Pride together and I really wish I has gotten to go with **you—"***

Her hand pulls back and falls on the bed between us. She has to take a second for deep inhales, looking out the window as she collects herself. I blink at her with slow wide eyes, something like hope unfurling in my chest.

“You know, dad has started actually going to church again,” she says, whisper quiet but sure. “He’s been talking to the youth pastor, the one who runs the LGBTQ+ outreach program. He’s really trying.” She silent for a beat. “I don’t think he’s ever really gonna move on from you.”

I blink hard to squint the tears out of my eyes. That’s…

“I don’t think I am either,” she admits near silently. “I’m going to live my life followed by the shadow of a sibling I left behind.”

I swallow hard around the lump in my throat, then take a ragged breath around it.

“Your fiancé, is this that guy you were dating in college that you said you wouldn’t be marrying? Bus stop boy?” I tease with a slightly wobbly smile, shameless in my redirection.

My sister barks out a laugh, sharper than she intended based on the surprise in her own face. She doesn’t so much as squint at the topic shift. “Yeah! Yeah he is!” Her grin takes on an even softer edge, the corners of her eyes relaxing. “Guess I changed my mind.”

“Looks like I beat you to the punch for once!” I laugh, and the sound is wet despite my best efforts. I hold up my left hand and wiggle my ring finger at her. “I’m already married!”

“How did you manage that?!” she squawks, grabbing my hand to inspect it.

“We’re queerplatonic. And he’s… he’s everything,” I avow a little helplessly. “And I’m — I’m ***happy,*** *and I’ve been on adventures like you wouldn’t believe, and I’ve got people I love who love me in return, and I just…” I blink back tears. I want her to know this. “I’ve done alright with myself.”*

“I’m really happy for you,” she says, thick in her mouth, and it sounds like a benediction.

There's a tender beat of silence between us, just the music and the breeze hanging in the air. If this is some kind of bullshit pre-death hallucination my brain is making up, it's a pretty good one.

"I'm really sorry, E," she chokes out, her mouth a wavering line as I watch her emotions overcome her in real time. "You're not coming back," she sobs. "You're dead and you're not coming back."

"Hey," I get out, half protest, half an attempt at comfort.

"I'm so fucking sorry," she whimpers, fingers tightening on my own before that registers, and she goes to let go. "I'm sorry, please just come back so you can tell me to die mad, c'mon—"

I twist my hand around to grab onto hers. "Nah, I think I'll just forgive you. Die happy lameass," I rebuff, and she goes perfectly still.

Both of our lashes are thick with tears, and the skin of her lip is pinched between her teeth. Her hand cinches tight on mine.

*"I was really mad at you — like **really** mad at you — for a **long** time," I admit haltingly, and the way her breath catches should feel like gratification, mollifying, but it doesn't. "But I — fuck, more than anything I just **miss** you. I'm gonna miss you forever."*

The last word cracks right down the middle, breaks into pieces and shatters over the bed spread, and in a moment my sister has me in her arms with her nose snug to my temple.

*"I'm right here," she promises, haggard. "Right now, I'm **right here."***

*I clutch onto her because she **is** and I **can,** and she does the same. The song ends, and something by Adrianne Lenker starts to play. I'm half-splayed in her lap, and fold my legs in*

tight around hers, and try valiantly to ignore the burning in my eyes.

"You know, me and my fiancé are planning to have kids. After the wedding and everything," she murmurs tentatively. I hum a questioning note into her arm, glancing up at her face. "I... if it's a girl, would it be ok if I gave her the name Edith? Since you didn't want it," she asks softly.

My breath hitches and my eyes start burning harder, I swipe across them with my forearm and nod. "Yeah," I croak out. "Yeah that would be ok. I'm sorry I won't be able to meet her."

My sister smiles serenely, staring out the window and into the horizon. "I know. But she'll grow up hearing all about my cool as all hell sibling and the amazing adventures they're off having. She won't meet you, but I'll make sure she knows you."

I curl further into my sister's side as her fingers start running through my hair. "Read me something else?" I request, hoarse.

She thumbs a pink page marker in between where she was and the middle, then flips the book open to it. "This one is called The Journey," she tells me. "It's one of my favourites."

"Thank you," I tell her, and I mean so much more than the poem. Her fingers still, then resume their methodical trip through my hair. I know she knows that.

"One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began," she reads in a murmur, "though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice — though the whole house began to tremble and you felt the old tug at your ankles."

I close my eyes and lean into her and the vibrations of her speech. I let her voice lull me off.

"'Mend my life!' each voice cried. But you didn't stop. You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations — though their melancholy was

terrible," she continues, voice growing ever softer. "It was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones…"

———

"...But little by little, as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice, which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do — determined to save the only life you could save."

I mouth the words with numb lips, barely feeling the sensation of the chapped skin scraping against itself. I can't hear my sister's voice anymore, and I can't feel her, but — well actually, I can't feel much of anything. It's not just my mouth, literally *everything* is numb.

"The fuck are you muttering?" a voice mutters itself, and I peel open my eyes like the rusted-over doors of a shed.

I'm immediately bombarded by a bright light shining down directly at me, so fuck that thing specifically. Once my eyes adjust some, I glance down the way of the voice and pause.

Trafalgar Law is hunched over my stomach, tying sutures into my skin with precise movements of his sterile-gloved hands.

"Poetry, dickwad," I croak, and the only reason I don't immediately choke and start coughing is because I literally can't feel the way my DRY ASS throat catches. All my senses are chilling behind a static-fuzzy barrier, and I can't even be mad about it.

Law doesn't jump, but the sharp snap of his eyes onto my face, mid stitch, is close enough. "I swear to god if I need to pump you full of more sedative, or recall the rest of my team in here, I'm just going to finish you off myself," he threatens.

“Well I don’t think that’s necessary,” I mumble, blinking roughly to get the grit out, since I can’t move my arms. “Fuck girl, I feel *crazy.”*

“I wonder why,” Law scoffs under his breath, focusing back on the stitches as he ties off the one he was doing and starts another.

I raise an eyebrow at him (somehow. I don’t know how either) and he glances up at it with another scoff.

“Medically speaking, you died twice,” Law says, droll and derisory.

I blink a couple more times, slowly. “Huh,” I say. “That’s… not great. Cannot say that’s great.”

“Do you know how many of your organs spontaneously failed in the middle of this bitchass surgery?” he asks, and it’s clearly rhetorical because he continues without even a second of pause for an answer. “No, you don’t, because I was the one fixing the damn things and even *I* couldn’t keep track of that shit.”

“I’m a marvel of modern medicine,” I claim without hesitation.

“You’re sure fucking *something,”* he agrees with a squint and a sneer. “You’ve got fuck shit going on with every damn moving part of you.”

Well. Yeah not great. Still!

“Thanks for saving my ass, I guess?” I offer, scrunching my nose weird after the sensation of one of those whatever-the-fucks attached to it registers.

“Don’t fuck with that,” Law immediately orders, and I reluctantly relent. “You said you’d help with my revenge plot, you can’t exactly do that when you’re dead, fuckass.”

“Yeah yeah tough guy, I won’t tell anyone you saved me just ‘cause you like me,” I dismiss breezily, and don’t react to him pulling his stitch extra tight because I can’t feel it. Loser.

“Asshole,” he says, but it lacks any real bite.

I stare up at the ceiling past the surgery lights, blinking sluggishly. “I’m like… actually alive, right? Like, this is… real?”

I don’t see if Law pauses, but there is a beat of silence. “Yeah,” he replies, eventually, simply.

I look back down at him. And after all that, the thing I get stuck on is the fact Law is wearing the heart-shaped labret I gave him. I smile, slow and curling. “Well if that’s the case, you’ve seen me naked so you gotta buy me dinner now, them’s the rules.”

He scowls up at me. “Detective-ya, I will cut you right back open.”

“You were wrist deep in my tiddy, man. I think you can call me Ed now,” I deadpan.

“Yeah no,” he refutes without hesitation.

“This is another point in favour of the ‘Ed is immortal’ theory, by the way,” I say haughtily.

“There’s things wrong with your body even god can’t explain, let alone science,” Law replies flatly. “Immortality is not one of them, trust me.”

“Whatever you say,” I sing lightly. “I’m just saying, all that and I’m *still* kicking. It’s gotta be *something.”*

“I’ve had enough of you,” Law deadpans, then looks over his shoulder. “Increase their dosage,” he tells someone else, then looks back to me. “Go unconscious so I don’t have to listen to you speak.”

“You fucker,” I insult him, but even to me it sounds fond.

I let myself go back under.

_____

The not-air is nearly ominous in its gravity, more serious than it’s ever been.

It would taste like a warning, or alarm, if it tasted like anything. It doesn’t though, and I’m past concept, so I just relax into the feeling with an air of expectation.

“This worked out pretty well for you, all things considered,” that same not-voice says thoughtfully. “Pretty lucky.”

I push the feeling of a raised eyebrow, the edge of a sardonic smile, and not a challenge, but a gesture to the whole everything going on with me right now.

Yeah, super fucking lucky.

“Will you hate me if I’m honest and say I was hoping for more than a suicide play from you?” the not-voice asks.

Yeah kinda.

The feeling of the stern eye of a lecturer, a parent hiding a smile at a disciplinary meeting, and someone exasperated by the antics of their pet gets laved over me.

"There's consequences for changing or challenging fate, ones Coin knows well," the not voice reminds gravely, but that edge of amusement is still there, right alongside a barely contained delight. "But, my Princeling has always been a bit of a rulebreaker anyway."

I feel a pulse of amusement through the void at that. It doesn't have quite the same feel as the other feelings.

Am I ever gonna understand what the fuckbuckle is going on? Here or literally anywhere?

"You'll understand what you need to, given time," the not-voice soothes, like that's supposed to mean anything.

Yeah ok but what if you just like. Told me what I want to know. Ever thought of that? Just telling me things?

"You, my dear Princeling, grievously misunderstand the point of telling a story," the not-voice says, glum and half grumble.

What about what Coin said, about going back home. How the fuck would that would work if I ***absolutely*** *died? I don't think my smashed orange traffic cone of a body is gonna want a soul inhabiting it any time soon.*

"I deal in wishes and miracles," the not-voice says, the amused feeling growing. "You think putting you back and staging a minor intervention with fate is beyond me? Perhaps the car will nearly miss you. Perhaps it will manage to pull its emergency brake. Perhaps you'll manage to throw yourself out of the way, perhaps someone will push you clear, perhaps someone else will get hit in your place. I would not put you back in a dead body Princeling, I would simply nudge reality to give you a chance."

Right… ok…

My soul is fucking exhausted. Surviving this shit was so much goddamn work.

“Trust me, Princeling, we saw,” the not-voice drawls, dripping in wry humor.

A hint of citrus-tinged interest simmers in the air like a cooling pastry.

Yeah… hard work.

“What are you trying to pull?” the not-voice questions flatly.

Hard work deserves a reward. I’m just saying. Er — not-saying.

Anticipation from two sources crackles like dry tree branches through the void.

I think your name would do nicely.

The void is still for a long moment. Then it lights up in sensation, laughter in all forms as the amusement turns to yellow-bright joy and a second string of feelings beaming in pride.

There’s the not-feeling of hands on my cheeks, that other type of sensation that tastes like trumpets and archways and eyebright determination. The silver-sweet almost-feeling of lips brushing over my right eye, and then a kiss pressed firm and lingering to the forehead, too.

***“Very well done,”** that other voice, from a distant earlier, praises in an adoring croon.*

It's an all encompassing feeling of warmth, and then the not-voice is right back in the forefront with mirth and merriment coating the tongue like a syrup.

"My name? Simple," the not-voice whispers, directly to the ear like a secret. "I'm the Wisher King."

Chapter End Notes

OOOHHOHOHHOH LOOK AT THAT HEHEHEHEAHAHEHAH!!! Anyway.

I been thinking about that scene with Ed and their sister for a long time. Yes I maybe cried a little. Shut up. Also the Adrianne Lenker song that starts player near the end is totally forwards beckon rebound. Because Owie. ALSO SURPISE BITCH I TOLD YOU ED'S NAME FROM BEFORE BEFORE HOW'S THAT FEEL???

I like Mary Oliver can you tell. I do be a poetry slut if you did not know. If you're looking for a good read, Crush by Richard Siken is my favourite poetry book of all time (the first poem is my favourite poem of all time aight I'm shamelessly biased) and I cry a little (i.e. a lot) every time I read it. I've got a note with all my favourite lines and it's just so fucken AUGH. Very very good queer literature for my melancholic folks.

It is so fucking important to me you guys know I opened up Google Maps and dropped myself in Chatlottetown PEI so I could look around and get better vibes, and I SHIT YOU NOT the FIRST DROP I end up at 16 Queen St. AND WHAT IS RIGHT FUCKING THERE. RED GODDAMN HONDA CIVIC. YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS SHIT UP I'M LOSING MY MCFUCKING MIND. AND THEN THERE'S *A SECOND ONE JUST UP THE ROAD FUCK* ***ALL OF THIS.*** So that was a little terrifying in an abstract way. Google Maps just keeps doing stupid shit to me like this, I once dropped in a random fucking town on a random street and there was a shop with an inside view I happened to see so I clicked on it and first thing I see? A fucking GIRAFFE STATUE that used to sit in my PARENTS' BEDROOM AS A CHILD. THE EXACT ONE. I will never be free from the THING more cosmic than LIGHT that haunts my every step.

Anyway love you guys see you next chapter! ♥

Chapter 136: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Six: From The Last Breath Of My First Death

Chapter Summary

> *Born For Loving You - Big Thief*
>
> I lean into it wholeheartedly for a moment. I let myself have that. Then my right hand is coming up to loop lightly around one of his wrists. “I need to get up,” I say simply.

Chapter Notes

> Made out with this brick sloppy style before chucking it at you, promise ♥
>
> It needs to be said I won at bowling yesterday and my entire ego is floating on it right now. Like yes I only managed second place every single round, but my fuckface consistency and ability to charm god into giving me nice things ADDS UP, OK, so I won overall. Because MATH. Let that be a life lesson for you or something idk.
>
> Enjoy this emotional rollercoaster and idk. Eat some chocolate today if you have some.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My eyes open into air that feels suspended in its stillness. Anticipatory, like it’s holding in place, like it’s waiting for the other shoe to drop, like—

I need to get up.

My first attempt to sit doesn’t go well, which I guess is to be expected, but it does earn me a hand on my shoulder gently suggesting I go back down. I open my eyes (which I guess I closed at some point) and look to my right, and there he is.

“Hey, kid,” Coin murmurs, soft and awed and with just the edge of a worry he can’t quite tuck away.

I blink slowly at him, a smile making its way onto my face. “Hey,” I croak back, and it makes me aware of several things attached to my face, and the dull aches beneath them. That, in turn, makes me *achingly* aware of the rest of my body.

Coin doesn’t miss the grimace. “They’ve got you on a painkiller now that you’re off sedation, I’ll let them know to give you another or up the dosage,” he offers, quiet, hand squeezing lightly where it’s still on the shoulder closest to him.

I look to the other one. My eyes get caught on the rest of me on the way, and… “Yeesh,” I voice hoarsely.

It’s kind of an understatement. Just a little.

I’m essentially mummified as far down as I can see before it’s blocked off by the thin sheet. I can feel bandages up around my neck that spiral down, criss-crossing with other sections and folding over others, only a thin strip of unmarred skin high on my ribs visible before my stomach is swallowed by even more.

My right arm is sparsely bandaged; several of the fingers and my knuckles sporting small band aids, but a majority of it is left uncovered, if slightly scuffed up.

My left…

“Yeesh,” I repeat more heavily.

The whole thing is wrapped up tight, I can feel *something* straight in the wrap of my forearm (a cast of some sort, I assume) and there’s a smaller band aid over the side of my hand, but. My bicep up to my shoulder is thick with extra padding, a numbness different from the painkiller haze in the rest of my body under the layers, and deeper below that an unnerving bone-deep *itchiness.*

There's a sling-ish thing — more just a drape of light blue fabric over that shoulder — spread evenly from my neck to the end of my collarbone, cradling my arm bent to my torso and crossing under and over my right shoulder, currently under Coin's grounding grip.

"It's a lot," Coin says after a beat.

"It was a lot," I echo faintly.

Coin's hand is warm against my back as he slowly levers me upright. I close my eyes as the world gets a little dizzy from it, but he's there to hold me steady. I sigh in relief even as my back and stomach protest the position, breathing deep to stretch the muscles gently.

Coin's hand slips away for a moment and I reopen my eyes to watch him reach behind himself, then drape the large blue shirt that was hanging off the back of his chair over my shoulders. The fabric pools around my waist in excess, nearly slipping right back off before Coin ties two strings near the collar together in a bow.

"How are you feeling, in an oversimplification?" he asks, voice still soft as he brushes my bangs out of my face, tying them back into a loose bun with the shorter half of my hair at the back of my head.

"Ugh," I groan, letting him gather the rest of my hair, the longer stuff at the bottom, with a second elastic high at the base of my skull.

He gives me a rueful smile. "I figured," he snorts, eyeing the shorter pieces of my bangs already falling back before pulling a handful of hair clips from his pocket.

A faintly cold and weighty one is slid over my right temple, a pale and light blue thing that almost looks like gem of some kind. A thicker plastic one, the same vibrant blue as the shirt, is pinned on the left. Last, he's sliding a skinny golden clip above that one, catching the majority of the fallaway and leaning back a smidge.

Then his hands, still achingly warm and gentle, are cupping my cheeks. His thumb brushes the edge of something I can see the faintest blur of below my left eye, a bandage I assume is the reason that eye is squinted slightly slimmer than the other.

I lean into it wholeheartedly for a moment. I let myself have that. Then my right hand is coming up to loop lightly around one of his wrists. “I need to get up,” I say simply.

He blinks slowly down at me. I blink slowly up at him.

“I need to get up,” I insist again.

Coin, grim faced for a second, holds my gaze. Then he nods. “Yeah,” he says, “I know.”

———

Coin helps me slide to the edge of the bed, more a cot than anything, and swing my legs over the side. I have to squint against the haziness of it, breathing as even and deep as I can, good hand clenched hard in the fabric of Coin’s shirt and his hands steady on my knees.

He needs to help me slide on a pair of dark sweatpants, and by *help* I mean he does it for me while I try not to pass out with my forehead to his shoulder.

There isn’t a single part of me unexhausted enough to feel even a flicker of embarrassment — for the act itself or being unable to do it myself.

I try very, very hard not to devolve into wheezing the tempo of my lungs while Coin kneels and rolls the cuffs of the pants up to about mid-calf, careful with the nearly entirely bandaged limbs while he looks up at me with a familiar kind of sadness.

I flinch at the first touch of my toes on the cold ground, essentially the only unbandaged part of my feet, and Coin huffs a wry sound. “We’ll see about getting you some slippers or

something," he promises lowly, leaning down and draping my good arm over his shoulders before carefully slipping his arm under my knees and scooping me off the bed.

I sink into his hold with a shaky breath, tucking myself into him and pressing my face to his chest, resting my eyes closed as things go spinning again. I feel the steady beat of both Coin's heart and his steps as he walks, hand curled in a loose fistful of his silver and brown hair.

I don't reopen my eyes until I feel the easy warmth of the sun settle over the back of my neck like a shower, like being submerged in a heated bath or the shallows of summer water.

At a glance I know it's Amazon Lily. Knew before even opening my eyes, by the sun-warm surety of Coin's presence holding onto me and the bleed of done-over-safe-clear he left in the air.

We're on the rocky flat of the beach, the same one Coin brought us to when we landed, with a partition of fabric and slats cutting it off from the jungle — save for one section that looks like it was trampled over and torn through in a rush.

I need to go. I *know* I do.

I still in Coin's arms, and his chin dips down almost immediately. The way he eases me down onto my feet is slow, careful, *delicate* in its support. The feeling of sandy rock between my toes is far away, secondary and fleeting.

The sunlight is warm on my skin like *flashfire,* like still being mostly asleep and dreaming the good dream, sparkly in my stomach, palms, knees, *everywhere,* like stillness and anticipation—

I look to the hole in the partition, to the jungle beyond, and I bolt.

———

I tear through the jungle like I'm on a mission.

I'm ripping through the trees and nearly tripping over rocks, that sparkly-warm-flashfire feeling building and stringing me along like it's tied to my gut, holding me up and turning the world into a multicolour blur of sensation and input that simplifies down into solid things.

There's pebbles sticking to my feet and foliage tugging at Coin's shirt over my shoulders, one of the pant legs Coin had cuffed coming loose and tripping me up more, disturbed ground and felled trees, there's screaming and wailing and the sounds of destruction—

I hold onto the sparkly-warm-flashfire feeling with all my might.

The energy with which I hurtle across ground isn't my own, couldn't possibly be, it's external in all the ways that matter and for fuck's sake I'm grateful for it. Any nerve endings I have left are singing like brass clashing, a little jarring but with nothing but *light*—

I crash through a bush and nearly faceplant. I burst through the other side and there's a gut wrenching wail that sounds like pure agony and I'm left breathless for a moment with heat hanging over my head like a mirage and—

Luffy's head snaps up.

He's just as bandaged as I am, if not more, covered in dirt and blood with his newly torn-up hands fucking *wrecked.* He's bawling his eyes out, a rush of tears that's thick and relentless as his chest hitches up and down where his knees are planted on the ground.

We both stare for a second. Luffy mouths my name, and I go sprinting.

Luffy surges to his feet, I trip and stumble, and we collide in a crash that should absolutely hurt for both of us, should make me black out in pain from the shock of it, but it *doesn't.*

My good hand scrambles for his back, catching on bandages and dislodging the cling of leaves but grasping wildly regardless. One of his clamps near-desperately on the back of my neck, the other getting bunched up in Coin's shirt in a bid to ensconce itself among my ribs.

We all but collapse to the ground, Luffy barely halfway back up and me already headed for the dirt, slumping onto him like whatever was holding me up vanished without warning. My legs fold awkwardly under me, chin going over Luffy's shoulder and digging in hard, with my broken arm pinned between us and miraculously not screaming in pain.

I draw a tattered breath inward the same way Luffy does, and we just hold onto each other for dear life.

"Y — you're fine?" he gasps out, still sobbing.

I'm nodding before he even gets past the first syllable. "I'm fine," I croak. "You're good?"

"Yeah, 'm good," he responds, arms tightening. I don't really believe that, but he doesn't call me out either, so we let it stand. "You're not — you're not dead, right?"

I drag my hand up to his hair, pulling back far enough I can look him in the eyes, and the laugh that rips through me is *ragged.* "I told you — we made a fucking *vow,* by your hand or not at all and I fucking *meant it—"*

Luffy's laugh is even worse. It's patchy and thin and rough as sandpaper as he pulls back a little further, the hand on my neck inching forward to press into my pulsepoint. He shuffles until our knees are touching, and the inches of distance *hurt.*

And it does hurt. The wild thrash through the jungle might have felt like nothing, but my entire body is tender with a kind of ache that doesn't just *fade,* only becomes easier to ignore. Or it would, if it wasn't ramping up and becoming more insistent and present by the second.

“Why did you—” his voice breaks off into something sharp and keening, and something inside me drops. “You — that was so *stupid!”* he almost yells, but he can’t seem to fill his lungs enough to raise the sound beyond a normal speaking volume.

It’s… fair, an accurate assessment if I’ve ever heard one, but still.

“I — I knew it wasn’t gonna be fine if I didn’t do anything, so I had to — to do *something,”* I stutter, shoulders hunching in and even if it’s the *truth,* that doesn’t stop it from feeling like a pointless excuse or meaningless justification.

“Did you know *you* were gonna be fine?” Luffy demands, and the expression twisting up his face is new, something I’ve never seen before and entirely unreadable.

I hesitate, and that’s enough that Luffy squeezes his eyes shut and ducks his head.

“I *knew* Ace wouldn’t be ok,” I repeat with a stinging kind of certitude. “The — *goddamnit,* was the chance worth less than a grim certainty? You can’t gamble with a *fact.* It pays to recognize when something won’t move unless you *make it.”*

“And you believe it just like that?” he asks, a wavering sort of breathy that makes unease cling to my bones with teeth. “Without anything else, you just believe it because it’s true?”

I can’t follow where he’s going with this. I can’t see the path he’s tripping and pulling me crashing through foliage down. “If I know it to be true, then I *know* that,” I push out, and it’s something rattled loose in my chest trying to articulate it. “I believe what I know, Luffy.”

His eyes flicker up through the sparse drape of his bangs, mostly held away by the bandages wrapped around his forehead, dark and infinite as an unfathomable thing spreads out around them.

“Do you—” Luffy cuts himself off with a haggard breath, eyes squinting back shut before they lift to meet mine, wide and watery and — “Do you only believe I’ll be King of the

Pirates because you've seen the future?" he asks, voice raw.

There's fear and uncertainty in his eyes. I'm hit with a solid wave of nausea so thick I physically waver in place, pure dejection twisting my features as it pleases.

"You—" I choke out before having to stifle my mouth with the curve of my shoulder, stomach acid nearly coming up with the words.

I mash my eyes shut as my chin ducks toward my chest, blindly fumbling around until I can grab onto his arm with my good hand, squeezing much harder than I should considering our injured states. I frantically shake my head, back bowing as I nearly fold myself into a ball despite the bright flashes of pain starting to wrack my body harder and harder.

"M'sorry," I manage to gag around the heavy thing inside me, chest constricting in an effort to keep me from upchucking. "M'sorry, m'sorry, *m'sorry—"*

"Ed," Luffy keens, sounding so defeated it's an actual punch to the gut.

My hand twitches uselessly where it's trapped in the sling, my other clamping into a vice as I jerk forward and all but smash my forehead into his. "M'sorry I could've ever made you feel that way," I gasp, tears coming hot and faster than I can put an effort into stopping.

Luffy's face crumples, and he never really stopped crying, but it picks up at a speed it didn't have before. "Ok," he sobs, and the sound is all relief and acceptance.

"I'll doubt myself, and I'll doubt the things I know about the future," I rasp, pressing us so close together we're breathing the same air, "but I will never, *never,* doubt you."

He nods against my head with a franticness that shakes my skull, both hands coming up to splay across my temples like he's trying to anchor me in place. As if I could go anywhere, as if I'd ever want to.

“I’m really really glad you’re ok,” he says, rough in his throat, “because if you weren’t I would have totally killed you for sure.”

I laugh with the kind of recklessness my ribs punish me for, because it’s Luffy and I can’t help myself, and it’s nothing but worth it when it makes the very air around him brighten.

“It *is* your job,” I sledge hoarsely, something bright and warm filling in the gaps in my chest.

“Making me work for it is *mean* though,” he says petulantly, tugging and shifting like any modicum of distance is getting to him too.

I snort and shove myself forward, all but sprawling into his lap as any effort I was making in staying upright becomes basically irrelevant. My chest heaves with a heavy breath that nearly takes it out of me, my good arm over his shoulders basically the only thing keeping me semi-vertical.

Luffy gathers me up in his arms with a sound like a sigh — like it’s a gift, like it’s his first bit of cold water after walking the entire desert of Alabasta twice over.

“M’sorry you had to worry,” I murmur, slotting into place against the crook of his neck like it’s what it was made for.

“You should be,” he huffs, but be sounds the furthest thing from upset.

I exhale with only a single hitch, limbs going lax as I rely on Luffy’s grip to keep me in place. “I really, *really* love you,” I breathe into the curve of his throat.

Luffy tilts his cheek into my temple with a soft sound. “I know that,” he says on an exhale, and I can hear his smile as much as I can feel it. “I love you too, I know that.”

There’s been oblivion inching its way into the corners of my vision for a while. The sheer comfort and solace of the arms holding onto me feed it like a furnace, and I let it eat away at my awareness with minimal complaint.

I sink into it like a welcome home, until it’s like being submerged in resin or molasses with my thoughts just as thick and twice as distant.

There’s a moment, a split second of cognizance where I’m almost sure I can feel Coin carrying me again, then nothing.

———

I wake up like a sigh, like a breath of pure relief and the release of muscles after finally being given a moment to *breathe.*

It’s soft and sweet and fuzzy at the edges with what could be painkillers, or something else entirely. There’s fingers skimming across my temple and into my hair in a repeated loop, and a pleasant warmth bleeding into my right side.

I crack an eye open into the dim light and my gaze automatically catches on Luffy — half sprawled over my shoulder with an arm slung over my hips, both of us crammed into a bed that definitely isn’t meant for two, and feel my mouth twitch up into a smile.

“If I was a medical professional, I’d probably discourage this,” a voice that isn’t his says quietly, and my other eye slips open to look at Coin. He’s posted up on the opposite side of the bed he was earlier, chair dragged around so he can lean an elbow on the cot while his hand continues to smooth over my hair.

“But you won’t,” I murmur, smile settling in easier while I slide my good hand out from where it’s trapped under Luffy’s arm, and reach for him.

Coin's free hand catches mine easily, leaning down to press a kiss to the knuckles before tapping it to his forehead. "No, I won't," he snickers, keeping his volume low.

The hand on my head continues to move, tracing a path back until he's cupping the space behind my ear and stroking the short cropped hair with his thumb. I let my eyelids slide halfway shut and glide my own thumb lightly across Coin's fingers as he settles our clasped hands down onto the sheets.

"Are you ok?" he asks.

"Fine," I reply automatically.

"Liar," he says, softly accusing but not *mean.*

I sigh and roll my head back into the curve of his palm. "Yeah."

There's a steady thrum of quiet, only the dull whir of machinery or AC filling the silence in a comfortable kind of white noise. Whatever drugs they've got me on are making the world liquid, time fluid in a sense that has me guessing how much time is passing every time I blink.

Everything lacks the sharp edge of urgency or the weight of unease I've become so accustomed to filling every second of being awake. It's… nice. It's like the shroud of uncertainty and apprehension has been dragged off my head and I can finally breathe again.

Metaphorically, because I'm pretending not to notice the subtle wheeze in my lungs, but it's still *there.*

Not that I'm acknowledging it, or will.

Bitch.

“You’re really something else,” Coin mumbles, not breaking the silence, just bending it. I lift my eyes more open by just a smidge.

“Yeah?” I hum, one corner of my mouth ticking up in a makeshift smirk.

“Now I feel like I shouldn’t be feeding your ego,” he teases, tapping the shell of my ear for a second. “But yeah, you are. You’re…”

He trails off and I watch him evenly for a beat, cataloging every wrinkle of his brow and stray strand of hair framing his face. It’s a little messier than when I left him on Amazon Lily, but I hardly have room to judge anyone’s *anything* right now.

“You care a lot, kid,” he decides on eventually. “You care and you’re willing to work for it. It’s a pretty kind of dedication, I’m glad I get to see it.”

“Accept what you cannot change, and change what you cannot accept,” I toss out easily, and Coin smiles.

“It’s deep, the kind of regard you have for everything around you,” he says after a beat. “Reverent. Especially for him.”

I glance sidelong at Luffy, and it makes something soft curl up in my stomach. I manage a subdued nod, not really feeling the need for anything more than that.

“Devotion is a man-made thing,” he offers warmly, and it sounds well worn around the edges. A concept he’s turned in his head a thousand times over, a mantra or invocation run smooth by the running water of time and thought.

“We are pretty good at it,” I huff lightly, taking long blinks as the low lighting and low tone of the conversation start to pluck at the blurry edges of me.

It's lulling, the room's atmosphere. There's nothing heavy about it besides the thick blanket of peace. Again, maybe that's the drugs. But having genuine *peace* in the air and to actually *feel it* in my bones has become such a rare commodity over the past few days, enough so I'm willing to believe it's something more.

The rhythmic ease of Coin's hand in my hair is doing absolutely nothing to keep me awake, doing a pretty damn good job of hindering it actually, but I don't have the heart to ask him to stop. It's just so *nice.*

"How do you take your coffee?" Coin blurts out of nowhere.

I manage to pry my eyes open for what I'm willing to be my last good look before I go back to sleep, and meet Coin's. He's got a funny look on his face, somewhere between questioning his choices and despairingly curious about the answer.

I fight down a snort my ribs can't take right now. "I don't like coffee," I admit in a murmur, a small smile playing warmly across my face. "It makes my hands shake and doesn't keep me awake. I'm a tea drinker."

Coin beams like I just told him he won a free car on Jeopardy. "I can make good tea," he promises, voice thick and sweet as honey.

I let my eyes flutter closed as my smile turns gooey and my hand slowly goes pliant in his. "Sounds perfect."

I allow myself to fall back to sleep again, absolutely no protests this time. Coin's hand continues its passage in my hair, a stalwart kind of dedication all its own, and a warm tether to follow down that I take gladly.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes I'm like 'I'm very understandable, I use big words *sometimes* yeah, but it's for flavour and definitely not enough to impact anyone's reading experience.' And then I'll be doing a proofread and come across a sentence with four separate words you've probably never had to say out loud in your life and I'm like oh. Oh nevermind. So maybe a dictionary is companion reading for this and that's a little bit my fault. Great news for my fellow kids who read in the library instead of going outside for recess in elementary school, bad news for nearly everyone else.

Forever a firm believe that if you've got the audacity and a thesaurus (and the ass of a poet & ability to make up brain-damaging metaphors) you can do anything. So. There. No this fic isn't my thesis and justification of that no shut up get OUT OF HERE—

Anyway I've got art for next chapter so ig you can look forward to that? See you then bye ♥!

Chapter 137: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Seven: I Want You To Know That I Love You, Don't Make Me Say It Again

Chapter Summary

I Love You Too - Ezra Bell

"Ok superstar, let's try avoiding shoving sharp rocks through the bottom of your feet from now on, agreed?" Coin says lightly, doing that dad thing of slapping his thighs before straightening with a grunt.

Chapter Notes

Yes the chapter is almost 5k we're not gonna talk about it shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Was someone gonna tell me this shit is longer than the whole LoTR trilogy and The Hobbit combined or was I just supposed to find that out by accident. What the fuck am I supposed to do with this information.

Completely unrelated to the chapter but this song is very Zosan to me. That is all, please continue.

So you wanted to know what happened to Ace huh??? HUH???? FINE!!! **HERE!!!!!!!**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"How sick do you think the scar is gonna be?" Luffy asks, voice a poorly stirred mix of excitement and regretfulness.

"Besides the nerve damage and mobility issues I'm certain are coming with it? Sick as FUCK," I answer easily, not giving into the urge to prod at my heavily bandaged shoulder despite my worst impulses. "How about you, scale of 1-10 how's yours gonna rank?"

"Twelve," he replies with immediacy and certainty.

I snicker, and Coin bats me lightly over the forehead with the back of his hand until I stop wiggling.

He does my hair back in the same way he had the first time I woke, hair clips in the same composition and everything, and helps me get ready without even a hint there's anywhere else he'd rather be.

Luffy, meanwhile, is seemingly content to simply rock back and forth on his crossed legs where he's seated beside me on the cot, doing his damnedest not to make a nuisance out of himself in the best way he knows how.

"I mean, mines like an *X.* Like what a pirate uses to mark where *treasure* is," he says with all due seriousness. "In fact, it's a twelve at LEAST!"

Luffy isn't being *impatient* yet, but he's definitely getting there. He's been a level or three subdued since we got up, but I have very little faith that will last in any great degree past a couple days. Or hours. Luffy's elastic that way, always bouncing back. Hah.

Damn, maybe I need to be put back into a medically induced coma, that was bad even for me.

"So what you're saying is that you're a treasure," I state with just as much severity. Luffy just grins at me and laughs.

"Ok superstar, let's try avoiding shoving sharp rocks through the bottom of your feet from now on, agreed?" Coin says lightly, doing that dad thing of slapping his thighs before straightening with a grunt.

"I didn't *shove a rock* through my foot the first time!" I protest, because that isn't even close to an accurate accounting of the events.

"Might as well have," Coin scoffs, but he's smiling in that overly fond way of his so I don't bother with a retort.

Luffy has just just opened his mouth for some kind of follow up comment, but it gets cut off when we both startle at a heavy thud against the doorframe.

It's Law, looking downright aggrieved, looming in the doorway with a glower like someone put a goldfish in his favourite coffee mug. "You two," he growls. "With me, *now."*

Me and Luffy exchange a look, both glance back at Coin's unhelpful shrug, and follow the tall angry man without protest.

_____

Ok so the rock-shoved-through-foot thing *was* an exaggeration, but like. I did kinda cut up my feet during the run through the jungle. Just a little.

So anyway I follow Law down the corridors of the Polar Tang on slightly tender feet, Luffy at my side and Coin a step behind, and don't contemplate the logistics of how the fuck this submarine works or how the layout fits inside it. Not my fucking business, thank you very much.

"Soooooo," I say after a bit. "Where are we going right now?"

Law makes a noise of great affront and shoots me a poisonous glare over his shoulder. He doesn't respond, which is… deeply unhelpful, but ok.

"Am *I* allowed to know where we're going?" Luffy asks a moment after, raising an eyebrow at me. I give a confused eyebrow back.

Law releases an aggressive sigh, coming to a stop and pivoting hard on his heel to glower at us all. "You are *so* much more trouble than you're worth," he grits out, eye twitching and looking a questionable five seconds from snapping and trying to dismember us both.

"…So that's still not an answer," I hedge, already wincing as the words leave my mouth.

"Wait, why are we trouble?" Luffy questions, as if US being TROUBLE is some kind of new accusation.

Alright I was wrong. Two seconds, max.

"Nightmares, you're all fucking NIGHTMARES," Law gargles, knuckle pressed deep into the space between his brows. "You're the most high maintenance people I've ever forced myself to suffer through, and there is no stretch of time nor distance that'll take me far enough away from you."

"Alright, little dramatic, but I'm into monologuing so uh. Pop off I guess?" I mutter, shooting Luffy another confused look.

"Can we have like. An example?" Luffy asks magnanimously, significantly more diplomatic than you'd expect him to be.

"An example," Law scoffs. "I could write treatises. But we do NOT have time for that."

"…You in some kinda rush?" I question apprehensively.

"No," he says shortly. "But I *do* want this to be over and done with."

"Why would you want it to be over?" Luffy asks, cocking his head.

"Because all of you are fucking *menaces* and we already had to wait for *you,"* he gestures to me with contempt and disgust I don't take personally, "to wake up before we took *you,"* the

gesture made at Luffy is even more derisive so I *really* don't take it personally, "off sedation because you would lose your SHIT ever time you woke up!"

I slant Luffy a sideways look. He shrugs like he has no idea what Law is talking about.

"Do you know how *annoying it was* to have to hold out until one of the other idiots woke up so you didn't fly off the handle again?!" Law continues to harp. "I should charge you hazard pay. I SHOULD CHARGE YOU, PERIOD!"

Oh I didn't know this was free medicare, slay.

"Charity is good for the economy and soul," I say solemnly. Law strangles a wordless scream somewhere high in his throat and turns around sharply to keep walking.

"Speaking of," he snaps, whip-crack sharp and with a generous shot of exhaustion. "Your charity chase is being weaned off sedation, finally. You two morons are gonna be there so I don't have to drag another half-dead carcass out of the damn jungle and put it back together a second time. AGAIN."

Me and Luffy both laugh awkwardly.

———

"He's gonna be loopy for a while," Law has said flatly, and somehow that wasn't nearly enough preparation. Not even *close.*

Ace is… well, there's a lot of words to describe Ace. Totally bitchin', for one. Beautiful gorgeous, for another. Points could be made for pure of heart, dumb of ass. The pookiest of all pookies, if we wanna get particular.

I don't think we still have words in the English vernacular to describe the pure incendiary indignation radiating off Ace in this moment.

Ace, heedless of the fact it is the pillows and the pillows ALONE keeping him upright, attempts to look menacing from his languide sideways heap. I don't laugh, because that would be rude, but the urge is there. And *strong.*

He's mummified like me and Luffy are, but to a much more reserved degree. Everything from below his armpits to the waistband of his pants is wrapped up tight, but besides a smattering of bandages big and small scattered across his limbs and face, the rest of him got off comparatively light.

Bitchass Logia. More words to describe Ace.

His slightly hazy eyes flick back and forth between me and Luffy, squinted suspiciously and groggy. "I," he begins grandly, absolutely slurring his speech, "seem to reeeeeeeeeeeeecall… uh. Wait gimme a sec I just had it…"

Me and Luffy exchange a look, and Law pinches his nose bridge with a sound of discontent.

"THE HOLE SPEECH!" Ace suddenly shouts, and we all jump.

"How many goddamn painkillers did you have him on?" I whisper harshly to Law, who gives me a murderous look.

"What's a hole speech?" Luffy questions.

"The fuckin' uhhhhhhhhhh —" Ace blinks slowly, twice. "Wassit called..? OH shovel. Shovel talk. I gotta. I gotta doooo that. Now, probably."

"I think it can wait if you want," I offer, hoping *desperately* he ignores that and does it now.

Ace shakes his head as much as he can, probably trying for a violent set of swings and really only managing a kind of bobbleheaded motion. “Nooooooooooo…” he protests, southern drawl turning his words to syrup. “I gotta um. Who was I..? Fuckin’ hell do I gotta do one feeeeeer both uh y’all?”

“Yeah. Yes please. Absolutely you do,” I say eagerly, nodding my head vigorously.

“What’s a shovel talk?” Luffy asks Law in a loud whisper. Law makes a pained noise.

“…If either of yooooooou… BREAK UP!” Ace proclaims, cycling through dramatic facial expressions in rapidfire order. “Death,” he says gravely.

Kind of gravely; the effect is a little diminished because the corners of his mouth are pulled so far down and his eyes are open so wide he looks like a fish.

“Death to you all,” he concludes in a hiss, eyes narrowing and nostrils flaring.

The pure kinetic energy me and Luffy must be generating from the sheer strain of not bursting out laughing right in his face could probably rival actual particle fusion.

“Beautiful speech,” I manage to choke out, a hair’s breadth from exploding and taking all my remaining stitches with me. By the way Law is eyeing me and twitching I think he notices.

“You know, I kinda thought our wedding was light on the death threats,” Luffy says, as close to thoughtful as he can be while his face looks like smeared plasticine in an effort not to blow a damn gasket.

“I hate you all and you have little to no redeemable qualities,” Law announces. “Great, now he’s seen you’re alive and kicking, get the fuck out of here. I need to do final checks and I’ll send him after you once the sedatives have worn off more.”

“Thanks Law!” me and Luffy chorus in unison.

Law makes a face at us. “Fuck off. Now.”

He’s such a sweetheart.

“And if any of you people hurt yourselves again before I can fucking leave I am taking your liver out I don’t even *care—”*

———

We’re pretty much just standing around on the rocky beach that’s been partitioned off for us like a bunch of tools when Ace finally emerges from the Polar Tang.

He looks terribly disgruntled, which isn’t *much* of a difference from how he looked earlier, but his eyes are much clearer and lock onto us almost immediately. There’s a muffled shout of something from inside the sub, and Ace turns back with a look of consternation before rolling his eyes and making a show of going down the ladder like a completely normal person.

“Wow, that is eerie,” Coin mumbles under his breath, and I glance over at him as he shakes his head with a small smile.

“AAAAAAAAACE! HURRY UUUUUUUP!” Luffy hollers, waving his arms wildly while Ace saunters over at a leisurely pace he *absolutely* slows down just fuck with him.

“Good morning princess!” I greet cheerily when he’s finally close enough for Luffy to yank into a hug without needing to stretch his arms (Law had threatened grievous bodily injury if he messed up his bandages by being Laffy Taffy).

Ace sticks his tongue out, then reaches with the arm not wrapped around his brother to tug me in as well. I go easily, feeling relief flush through my systems with a lingering tingle like mint mouthwash, and sink into the curl of his hand with a vindicated kind of triumph.

Ace dips his nose in between Luffy and I's heads, dropping kisses to both of our temples before pulling back a little. "You both look like shit," he decides, knocking our heads together.

Me both make exaggerated sounds of pain, despite the fact it doesn't hurt, because of course we do.

Coin laughs at us from a half step back, and Ace turns to look at him with a small frown, draping an arm over my shoulders and carefully avoiding the heavily bandaged stuff.

Coin just looks at the group of us, then Ace, and breathes. "And just like that, everything changes," he chuckles, then beams at me. "You're a *marvel,* kid."

I grin back at him, the words settling warm on my skin. "You've got a low bar for expectations," I tease.

Coin snickers again. "And you've got your," he vaguely gestures at Ace, "doomed by the narrative boy."

I reach up and grab Ace's hand, leaning into his shoulder. "No, doomed by *our* narrative boy. And me who is not a boy but was also seemingly doomed by our narrative? Also we're not doomed now because we circumvented that shit like *bosses,"* I say solemnly.

Coin's laugh is completely indulgent, and I duck my head to hide my smile.

"Er — sorry, who is this?" Ace asks awkwardly.

“Oh, right,” I say, blinking and shifting. “Ace, Leon D. Coin. Coin, Ace,” I introduce with a smile.

Ace blinks twice, slow. “As in the Tailor of Purgatory, Leon D. Coin?” he asks with trepidation.

We all nod at him.

“As in the Roger Pirate, Leon D. Coin?” he clarifies.

We all nod again.

A complicated tangle of emotions flickers across Ace’s face. “Ah,” he says finally. “You come here to meet me?”

Coin shakes his head. “Nah, that’s just a bonus. I’m here for Ed.”

I’m not sure exactly what emotion Ace is using to make the expression he’s got on, but suffice to say it’s inscrutable. His hand tightens on mine briefly before purposefully relaxing.

“Still. It *is* nice to meet you kid,” Coin offers with a smile, something soft and half-sad in his eyes. Ace nods wordlessly. Coin just watches him for a moment, like he’s mapping over his features and seeing something no one else can.

Ace twitches under the scrutiny, looking off to the side and shuffling his feet. I look between the two of them, then exchange raised eyebrows with Luffy.

At last Coin sighs. “Thank god you’ve got your mother’s cheekbones, that bone structure will save your damn life,” he whistles. *“Wow,* she did a good job with you. Lucky you don’t have to wait for your face to grown into your nose like Roger’s did, the fucking noob.”

Ace burst out laughing like has to. That very quickly chokes off into something almost like crying, because of course it does.

He quickly stifles the sound, coughing it off with his muscles rippling under his skin like snakes resettling. “Well, I can’t imagine anything from that piece of shit being a positive addition to my genes,” he tosses out, cold and *biting* but not directed at Coin.

I bristle, shooting him an apologetic wince and wiggling my hand out of Ace’s.

Coin just gives him this pained grimace of a smile. “Ace, I’m gonna have to ask you not to insult my dead Captain to my face, please,” he requests, thin and reedy.

Ace kinda blanches before ducking his face without saying anything. I smack him upside the head.

“Ow!” he yelps, before rubbing at the nape of his neck and looking off to the side. “Sorry, that was rude of me,” he mumbles, face twisting up.

Coin sighs, looking at him with this unreadable expression, eyes soft. “Don’t worry about it, kid.”

Ace’s mouth pinches further, and his downcast eyes stay trained on a pebble a couple feet away.

“I know it’s… a little *raw,* and frankly your feelings are your business and no one has a right to them — not me or anyone else — but…” Coin trails off a little, wiping a hand down his face with his brows pinched together. “It might do you some good to remember he had an impact on a lot of people besides you.”

I glance slowly between the two of them, watching the way Ace’s shoulders pull in tighter.

“Roger had a lot of people who loved him, for better or worse,” Coin offers quietly, shrugging a little. “You might want to think about why.”

“You really cared about him?” Ace asks, voice small.

Coin gives him a sad smile, despite the fact Ace still hasn’t looked up. “Yeah, ‘course I did. Guy like that — you can’t meet him and *not* love him.”

Ace has a look on his ducked face like he doesn’t know how to interpret this. Like it’s incompatible with his current outlook and he doesn’t know how to cope with a puzzle piece that doesn’t fit in his composition.

“He can’t have *not* had something wrong with him,” he mutters after a fraught moment, like he’s grasping at straws.

“Why not?” Coin asks, gentle and open.

“If it’s not something that was wrong with Roger, it’s something that’s wrong with *me,”* Ace says near-silently, cracking in his mouth.

For the record, you’re not supposed to punch injured people in the gut. Just as a reminder.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Coin immediately refutes, unshakably certain and immutable as fact. *“Nothing.* Not a damn thing.”

Ace pinches his lip between his teeth, still not raising his head.

Coin sighs again, tiny smile a little rueful and close to regretful, but not quite. “Even if you DID get some kind of something from him, it wouldn’t really matter. The guy didn’t raise

you, you're something else entirely."

Ace's breath hitches and his arm tightens faintly around the back of my neck.

Coin walks forward, then past us, pausing at Ace's side to rest a hand on his shoulder. "I don't like to be mad about things I can't change. Rage against the machine, if that's what makes you feel better, but never against yourself. They're just ties that bind you. Not chains, just strands of DNA," he says quietly, and then he's gone.

Ace takes a deep, shuddering breath in the wake of Coin's departure, then tips his chin up once again. "Wanna go sit in the sun?" he asks, a little raw around the edges.

I reach up and squeeze his wrist. "Yeah."

Luffy nods from his other side. "Yeah," he echoes. "I wanna take a nap, though."

Ace laughs with a rattle. "Alright. That's fine."

———

We end up settled on a flat stretch of stone right over the edge of the water, sun-warm and smooth.

It takes absolutely no time for Luffy to fall asleep curled up in front of us like a lizard. His head is pillowed on my thigh, and a hand is curled into the loose fabric of Ace's pant leg. We sit in companionable silence for a while, watching the glittering expanse of an ocean only disturbed by the occasional Sea King.

I notice idly that the Heart Pirates flag is flown at half mast. Law can front as much as he likes, that guy clearly cares a lot about what goes on around him.

Ace is the one to eventually break the quiet. “So is that Coin guy like your…” he trails off, words lilting up at the end in question.

“Pseudo family,” I answer with a shrug. “I know all this stuff is like — uncomfortable for you, but he’s a really great guy, if you want to talk to him about Roger. Or never mention it to him again, if you like. Just having a normal conversation with him could be good.”

Ace makes a truncated sound. “Might be in everyone’s best self-interest if I don’t get attached to him. Seems like I get every vaguely father-shaped figure in my life killed,” he mutters, arms crossing over his raised knees and fingers pinching into the skin.

I glance over to regard him with a heavy gaze. “This about Whitebeard?” I ask, low.

He scoffs a tight sound. “It’s my fault he died,” he bites out harshly. “He was my pops, and all I got him was *killed.”*

I turn my face more to give him the full weight of my expression.

“Hey, I’m about to say something that’ll blow your mind. You ready?” I don’t wait for a real answer. “Good. You didn’t kill Whitebeard and you sound like a self aggrandizing asshole when you say that,” I state, slowly and derisively.

Ace blinks widened eyes at my tone, grip of his arms loosening in something like surprise.

“He was a grown ass man. Trust me, your comparatively scrawny ass was NOT making decisions for him,” I say flatly.

Ace lets out a long, slow breath, releasing his arms to settle into a more comfortable position. “If you say so,” he mumbles, not sounding like he fully believes it yet, but I leave it to lie.

I let my head turn back towards the water. We return to the silence for a long lingering moment, my hand carding gently through Luffy's hair around the bandages while he makes his weird sleepy sounds.

Once again, Ace is the one to speak first.

"What…" he starts, almost a croak. "What do I do from here?" he asks with a lost kind of desperation.

I look at him from the corner of my eye. "I dunno, drastically alter your appearance to try and regain some control of your life? Grow out your hair or pierce your nipples or something," I suggest with a careless shrug.

"Ok *what* is that advice, you shit, if I wanted jokes I would have made the clown stick around!" Ace squawks. I laugh, because of course I do.

Ace takes a beat to let me get it out, rolling his eyes before settling back into solemnity. "I've fulfilled my dream, and my pops is dead," he says with an unmoored kind of desolation.

I twist my head to regard him for a second. "You fulfilled your dream?" I ask carefully.

Ace nods, expression far away with something unreadable in his eyes. "My dream," he starts, then pauses for a deep breath, eyes fluttering closed as sunlight hits his face, "my dream is, and has always been, to feel worthy of love. To be worthy of the life I was given."

I know my expression softens, and my fingers slip from Luffy's head to come up and rest on the freckled skin of his upper back. His next breath shudders through him, pushing into the press of my hand.

"I guess it didn't really click until I was dragged off the scaffolding where I should have taken my last breath by some idiots stupid enough to not only *love me,* but fight the entire government to prove it," he adds, a touch wry and a little awed alongside the humor.

I breathe a laugh into my single raised knee. “Well, I guess *something* had to give,” I murmur.

“I can’t — even *I* can’t look that in the face and not admit it means something,” he chuckles, voice cracking as the tears start. “How could I — what a fuckin’ *disservice* to you if I don’t let myself acknowledge that. So if I can admit that I’m loved, and admit I love in turn, then there has to be something out there that deemed me worthy to carry that torch. And I —” his voice cracks again, and he has to take a moment to hide his face, scrubbing at his eyes with his arm.

“Ace, take your time,” I sooth, running a hand across his shoulders.

“I’m glad to be alive,” he admits, cracked and raw as he turns to me with a watery smile, “if only to tell you the care that’s been put into me is reciprocated.”

It’s one of the nicest punches to the stomach I’ve ever received.

I slide my palm off his back to take his face in hand, tenderly pressing our foreheads together with a shaky but real smile. “What a *privilege,”* I choke out, vocal chords wavering, “to get to love someone as wonderful and terrible as you.”

Ace laughs a broken, rueful sound. “Bit of a chore, really. But despite all the terrible, it means a lot you resign yourself to it anyway —”

“I’ve resigned myself to a lot of things, but caring about you isn’t one of them,” I interrupt, pointed, sharp. “I’m fucking *blessed* to do that, I welcome it with open arms and I’ll fight to keep that liberty.”

Ace breathes through the emotion that shudders through him, eye squeezing shut. *“God,* you just keep doing that,” he says, wet. “How have people like you been dogging my footsteps my entire life?”

I beam at him, scooching just enough to lay my forehead on his shoulder where his own name rests. “You are a culmination of everyone who has ever loved you,” I murmur. “You don’t have to carry the weight of their lives as responsibilities, you’re just followed by their hopes for you.”

Ace’s breath catches a little, just enough his chest hitches with the motion. “That… that’s a nice way to look at it,” he rattles out.

“Every footstep, every inhale — it’s proof that they lived, that they *cared,* and they saw something *beautiful* in you that was worth the highest effort,” I continue, glad beyond anything I haven’t run out of words yet.

“It’s a lot to live up to,” he mumbles, mouth quirking up slightly.

“It is,” I concede, soft. “You have the rest of your days to try paying that back, if you want. But I think I speak for all of them when I say they’d rather you live how *you* want, with the ever-present reminder you come from love, and to love you shall return.”

“Yeah?” he croaks, managing a fragile smile.

“Yeah,” I repeat, flashing my own wobbly attempt back.

Ace takes a shaky breath and dips his chin down. “If nothing else, me being born at all sounds pretty miraculous, given the circumstances,” he manages, chuckle insubstantial but *there.*

“Some people say birth is the first great miracle. That it’s the most monumental thing, to simply be born,” I hum idly, carding my fingers through Ace’s hair.

“Do they?” Ace sighs tremulously.

“I think they’re wrong,” I state, and manage a smile far more easily when Ace tilts an incredulous look back at me. “I think the first time you, with your brain half cooked and the weight of the world on your shoulders, decide you genuinely enjoy being alive, *that’s* the first miracle.”

Maybe you’re 14, sitting in the grass and you can feel the sun on your face and suddenly staying alive another day isn’t scary, it’s exciting.

Maybe you’re 16, and you recognize a constellation while stargazing and suddenly learning everything you possibly can is so much more important than what your name is or what your body looks like.

Maybe you’re 18, and someone takes your hand and suddenly you’re not just existing, you’re a part of someone or something, and it’s impossible not to be proud of that fact.

Maybe you’re 20, and you’re *alive* and growing old isn’t scary, it’s an honour and you’re *not alone anymore.*

Maybe you’re 30, 40, 50, fuck you could be any age and — and the relief of living can come from anywhere. *Human connection* can come from *anywhere.* Outside your window, through a screen, across the room or the bus or the hall, it’s *everywhere.*

Hold onto life with frantic desperation, with two hands, with your nails and your teeth if you have to. Because there’s reasons to everywhere you fucking look.

“The world tries so damn hard to kill you every way it can, but to love being here *despite* that?” I close my eyes and press my forehead more firmly into Ace’s bicep. “I think birth is a terrible place to start the miracle. The second you decide you’re glad it happened at all, *that* is a miracle you can’t contain in the simplest definition, a blessing you can’t quantify with mere words.”

Ace takes a deep breath and closes his watery eyes into the sunlight. “You just don’t run out of speeches, do you?” he asks, rhetorical and quiet.

“I think after this I’m out for the day,” I say wryly, and it gets a chuckle out of him, so I count it as an absolute win.

There’s a moment of calm as the silence returns, the distant sound of leaves rustling in the jungle and the slow lap of the water against the rocks sluggish with the lack of wind, but a soothing kind of white noise regardless.

“Did you see the ass on the guy who saved us though?” Ace whistles, breaking it without ceremony.

I clap a hand on his shoulder. “Ace, I love you so much it makes my stomach physically hurt.”

I pause a second as I assess that feeling a second time.

“Actually, I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Wait what? OH MY GOD —”

I do end up busting some of my stitches from the vomiting, and have to be carried back to the sub where Law waits with a furious glower and a scalpel clenched in his fist, but it’s *so* fucking worth it.

Chapter End Notes

God I fucking love Law. Let That Man Go he's had enough. Also Coin stan till the day I DIE. YES I made the man SHUT UP I can still love the little freak.

Anyway this is me throwing Ace content at you, slapping your hard across the face, and then giving you a lil peck on the forehead to distract you while I sprint away. Avast!

Aaaaaaand art because Ed is my pookie and I love them ♥

LIFE IS TRYNA KILL ME, so next chapter is being pushed back to Wednesday the 23rd :(sorry love you guys byeeeeee ♥

Chapter 138: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Eight: So My Love, I'm Sorry, But Still I Am Leaving

Chapter Summary

> *Exeunt - The Oh Hellos*
>
> Law's face twists up and his hands raise to twitch in and out of fists as he makes a strangled sound. "The worst part is I think you actually fucking mean that, but I still know you're full of *shit."*

Chapter Notes

> We're all going to collectively ignore that this is happening on Wednesday? Yes? Great.
>
> The Mental Illness do be kinda getting me tho. I mean I'm a trooper I'm gonna keep hustling through it but yikes. It's got hands and those hands have brass knuckles.
>
> Anyway who said RAYLEIGH CONTENT? Who said HANCOCK CONTENT??? It's me I said that. GO FORTH AND FEAST ig

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm not fucking kidding this time, I am not wasting a SINGLE more stitch on you, and if you tear yourself open I'm letting you go fucking sceptic."

The words are fairly harsh. *Pretty damn harsh,* I'd say.

I'd also say they're unwarranted but that would make me a lying bastard.

Law looks so close to the edge, like he's genuinely preparing himself to shove *us* off the edge and jump along right after, and honestly if I was any less of an asshole I'd feel bad about it.

“Law, buddie, pal, inamorato, I have such a high opinion and unfathomably deep appreciation for you I could not be fucking *paid* to rip another stitch,” I say solemnly.

Law’s face twists up and his hands raise to twitch in and out of fists as he makes a strangled sound. “The worst part is I think you actually fucking mean that, but I still know you’re full of *shit.”*

Goddamnit he’s gotten to know me too well, I might have to fucken kill the guy now.

I’m sat, patiently crosslegged after Law had fixed up my busted stitches with vicious indignation, Luffy curled up on my right lightly humming and Ace on his stomach on my left, chin propped up on his hands.

There’s a sudden shout from outside that has all of our heads snapping towards it. “HOLY SHIT WHAT WAS —”

It’s one of Law’s crewmates, I can’t tell who off the top of my head, sounding an even mix of alarmed, awed, and terrified.

“Oh for the love of — what now?!” Law snarls, looking like just *asking* ages him five years.

The whole room tilts a bit as the sub seems to bob in the wake of a wave, which has various eyebrows shooting up including my own. Is that..?

“WHA..? A MAN?!” another yell proclaims, and I’m already on my feet and making my way up and out.

“If we’re getting attacked, I think I’ll just take my chances in the Calm Belt,” Ace decides placidly, following on my heels and half dragging Luffy (who had, in fact, been too distracted by humming to notice what was going on) with him.

“No, you won’t,” I deny easily.

“No, I won’t,” he agrees.

“Damn fucking right you won’t,” Law grumbles from even further behind. “What is it with you people and your inherent need to waste my effort?”

None of us answer, because there’s another even louder shriek outside. I’ve just leveraged myself out of the hatch when Penguin, who I can actually see now, shouts “WHAAAA — *DARK KING RAYLEIGH?!”*

Luffy crams himself into the opening of the hatch beside me, finally with the program and grinning. He’s already got an arm around me and is slingshotting us towards the beach before I can get another word in.

We land without the usual bone-rattle of Luffy’s landings (thank GOD) to the scene of Rayleigh himself, drenched head to toe and somehow still having his glasses miraculously perched on his forehead, soaking a wet puddle into the ground.

“I know you people, we met on Sabaody,” Rayleigh hums at the gathered Heart Pirates gaping at him. He turns and follows their gaze back to the hulking and slowly sinking form of a Sea King in the water behind him. “Ah, yeah I ran into a nasty storm that sunk my boat. Had to swim the rest of the way here.” He twists his head to work a crick out of his neck and sighs. “My body doesn’t move like it used to, I really *am* getting old.”

“T — There’s no storms in the Calm Belt, you mean you swam through the *whole thing?!”* Penguin asks in a strangled screech.

Rayleigh shrugs and wrings the water out of his discarded outer robe thing with a loud splash, dropping to sit on a grassy stone and laying the garment out to dry. “Yeah. Now where’s…” he catches sight of us and a grin takes over his face.

“Old man Rayleigh!” Luffy exclaims, pointing at him. “What’re you doing here?!”

Rayleigh laughs a close-eyed smile. “Kid, Luffy, it’s good to see you both again!”

A hand settles warm in my hair and I know who it is even before they speak. “Well well well, look what the cat dragged in,” Coin drawls, smirking as he leans on my head like an armrest. *Shithead.*

“Look what the non-existent *tides* dredged up, Leon D. Coin in the flesh!” Rayleigh returns, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees and brandishing his shirt at him.

Coin scoffs, but it’s a fond sound. “Yeah yeah, and I’m seeing entirely too much of yours right now, put your damn shirt on. Cover them up, slut.”

Rayleigh throws his head back and laughs.

I raise a judgmental eyebrow at Coin and he shrugs noncommittally back.

“Nearly ten years since I last saw you, and you’re already attacking my dignity. Coin you wound me,” Rayleigh jests, but obligingly tugs the damp shirt back on.

“Objection, you have no dignity,” Coin says brightly, ruffling my hair as he pushes off to walk towards the other man.

“No less than you,” Rayleigh shoots back, not bothering to reign in the wide grin taking over his face as he rises to meet him.

It’s hard to tell who reels who in for the hug, but I watch Rayleigh’s hand clap down on Coin’s back twice and a tension I hadn’t even noticed ease out of his shoulders, and something like melancholy drives through me.

Then of course I remember exactly what I know about their relationship and decide I don't want to look at the implications of this further.

"We having a retirement home reunion over here?" Ace asks under his breath, coming up beside me and Luffy and looking over at the two Roger Pirates inquisitively.

"Oh yeah, final hurrah before we chuck 'em in the old people bin," I mutter back, smirking as he snorts.

"I've never known an old pirate to go quietly, especially if there's two of them, but I think you're up to the task," Ace says mockingly, patting me on the shoulder.

"Alright listen here you little shit —"

I'm interrupted by movement beside me, and turn to watch as Rayleigh — who managed to peel Coin off him at some point, I guess — plops Luffy's straw hat onto his head. "Here, this hat means a lot to you, yes?"

Luffy just blinks for a second, a bit stunned. Then a wide smile breaks out across his face and he reaches up to tug it further onto his head. "Yeah… thanks."

"Wait a minute, I know you…" Ace mumbles, squinting at Rayleigh.

Coin, who had followed Rayleigh over, claps a hand on his shoulder and nods his head towards Ace. "Rails, this is Portgas D. Ace. Ace, this is Rayleigh," he introduces, shooting Rayleigh a subtle but meaningful look.

Ace and Rayleigh blink at each other for a second.

“Wait a goddamn minute you’re *Dark King Rayleigh?”* he yelps incredulously. “The hell were you doing working as a *ship coater?!”*

“It’s my job,” Rayleigh replied automatically, still apparently processing what Coin said. He looks at Ace for a beat, studying his face to the point Ace shifts back a bit, then whistles. “Damn, no wonder I didn’t connect the dots when we met, you’ve got Rouge all over your face! Thank god for the nose, bullet thoroughly dodged.”

“That’s what I fucking said!” Coin gestures emphatically. “But hey, at least his nose was fine once he grew into it!”

Rayleigh makes an uncertain noise. “Weeeell…”

Coin gives him a sly squint. “Oh yeah?” he drawls. “Well *I* seem to recall *you —”*

He’s cut off by Rayleigh squawking and slapping his hand over his mouth. “ANYWAY —” he says loudly.

I… yeah, for my own mental health I will *not* be inspecting that any closer.

“Hey, if you’re here, what about any of our crewmates who might be following your vivre card back to Sabaody?” Luffy asks, cutting that conversation off at the head, whether he knows it or not.

“I left it with Shakky,” Rayleigh answers easily. “Couldn’t exactly move around freely otherwise, yaknow?”

There’s a choked sound behind us, and we turn to see Jimbei arriving from wherever he was and staring at the lot of us dumbstruck.

“Hi Jimbei!” I say brightly, waving at him. “Have you been here the whole time?”

He seems to shake off a little bit of the shock and nod. “Ah, yes. I had helped you, Luffy and Ace get off Marineford, it’s my duty to ensure your wellbeing while you all recover,” he answers slowly. “I had been… well, retrieving Luffy when he would run off. I was present while the two of you reunited, and helped bring you both back to the good doctor with Coin.”

Oh. That’s a little embarrassing, but in all fairness the guy has seen me in some *states* over the past few days already so at this point there’s really no saving face with him.

I give him a grin. “Oh. Thanks, Jimbei! I appreciate it!”

“Is that Dark King Rayleigh?” he asks quietly, eyes flickering to the man in question.

“Yeah,” I respond at the same volume.

“Ah. Ok,” he mumbles, rubbing the heel of his hand over his forehead.

“Shakky mentioned something about your lot wanting to wait a bit before heading into the New World, is that right?” Rayleigh asks, giving Jimbei a polite nod before getting back to what he was saying earlier.

Luffy frowns a bit. “Yeah, that was kinda the plan…” he murmurs, looking sideways at me while I look sideways back.

“I’m assuming the rest of this wasn’t really part of said plan,” Rayleigh continues, gesturing vaguely.

“Yeah, no not really,” I say blandly. I mean it *kinda* was, but uh. Yeah no, not all of it.

“Are you sure your crewmates will even be on their way to Sabaody, then?” Rayleigh questions.

Luffy tilts his head a little, looking me a little more head on. I sigh and tilt my own head back. “Well, they might be in the best places for them to get the training we wanted to get from waiting anyway,” I offer.

Luffy pinches his lip between his teeth and rubs the tip of his finger into his forehead. “Maybe…” he says slowly. “Hmmm. We’d need to find a way to tell ‘em to stay put then, though, or else they’ll come running. You know they will.”

I smile a little. “Yeah, I know. *And* we’d need to give them a time to actually meet back up, whenever you decide that should be.”

“And it would have to be somewhere like, *everyone* would see, since we can’t talk to them directly,” Luffy adds, brows scrunching as he thinks it over really hard.

I grin wider. “True enough. *And* something our crew is smart enough to figure out without the rest of the world catching on, since everyone would see it.”

It’s actually really gratifying to see him come to conclusions himself. Big fan of that, me.

“Soooooo…” he mumbles, whole face contorting as he considers, then snaps back to a big smile as he claps the side of his fist into his other hand. “We’ll put a message in the newspaper! Everybody reads the news, right? So we just gotta do something big enough reporters are all over it!”

I flick the brim of his hat and beam. “Excellent idea, Captain.” He beams right back.

“Not to be a downer, kid, but if *you* show your face anywhere with a camera you’re gonna get turned into paste,” Coin cuts in, absolutely being a downer.

“Man, why specifically *me?”* I grouch, then take a second to reflect on exactly what kind of dumbassery I did while we were on Marineford. And exactly what kind of shit I was yelling at Sengoku in full view of like, everybody. “Oooooh,” I half mumble half hiss, “oh yeaaaaaaaaah… I might have painted a target the size of Texas on my back…”

“Yeah, now it’s registering,” Coin snickers.

“You oughta know all of that was getting livestreamed, I watched the whole thing from Sabaody,” Rayleigh says lightly. “That’s not a bolthole you should be peeking your head out of any time soon.”

I suck on my teeth with a squint. “Ok. Yeah no I should not be in the paper any time soon,” I concede. “Can’t exactly send Ace either, not after all that clown behaviour.”

“Excuse me?” Ace squawks, offended. *“Clown behaviour —”*

“But it does need to come from you,” I say to Luffy, ignoring that. “Shit Captain, this might be a solo mission.”

“He won’t be alone,” Jimbei says firmly. “I will accompany him anywhere that’s needed to get your message out, you can count on me.”

HE’S SO COOL AND ALSO AWESOME. I LOVE HIM.

“I’ll certainly help as well,” Rayleigh adds, laughing a little. “You think a second strike at Marineford will do the trick?”

“Oh god, you’re all insane,” Ace whispers to himself, burying his face in his hands.

“If you go off fighting before two weeks of rest, I’m cutting you into pieces and sending them to every corner of the world,” Law hisses behind us, a menacing shadow of medical advice.

“We don’t have to *fight* through Marineford a second time,” Luffy says petulantly.

“It would probably make more of a statement if you didn’t, to be honest,” I point out with a shrug. “Offer your respects to the fallen or something.”

Luffy stares out at the water for a moment, then turns back to me. “Two years?” he offers.

“Two years should do fine,” I agree with a smile.

Luffy nods. “Then I know what to do.”

“What you can *do* is wait a few goddamn days to heal, and for me to be far enough away I have plausible deniability without it being medical neglect,” Law snarls. “If you’re going to break the two weeks of bedrest at least do it where I can’t see!”

“You got it, Trafalguy!” Luffy laughs, ignoring the murderous look that overtakes Law’s face.

“That isn’t my goddamn — you know what? This isn’t my problem,” he mutters, spinning on his heel. “I’m leaving before sundown, get your shit off my ship by then! All of you, move your asses!” he calls to his still gawking crew, causing them all to skitter and scramble up into the ship after him in a rush.

“I really do like that guy,” I hum brightly.

“I don’t think the feeling is mutual,” Ace says flatly.

“No, it is,” I rebuff, completely certain. Like 70% certain.

“Your plan is to take the kid for training, yeah?” Rayleigh asks Coin.

“Yup,” Coin confirms with a nod. “You’re taking the other one?”

“Might as well,” he agrees with a shrug.

“We can drop the other kid off with Newgate’s kids, I don’t mind a detour,” Coin adds, tugging a stand of his hair.

Rayleigh shrugs again. “No problems there, not from me.”

“Wait, you’re gonna get me back to the rest of the Whitebeard Pirates?” Ace demands with a jolt.

Coin raises an eyebrow. “Sure kid, otherwise they’ll start sending search parties. If we can find a way to contact them before we leave that’ll be ideal, but if not I know a few places to hit.”

Ace’s face twists up like he doesn’t know how he wants to respond.

I elbow him. “Just say thanks,” I advise in a loud whisper.

He scowls at me then turns back to Coin with a reluctant and shallow bow. “Yeah, thanks. Thank you.”

Coin waves him off easily. “Don’t mention it, I don’t mind.”

“W — *RAYLEIGH?! Is that you?!”* a shrill voice demands of behind us, and we all turn to look as a procession comes from the jungle in the form of a big wagon loaded with food benign pulled by… big monkey guys, flanked by Sandersonia and Marigold, a second cart with Hancock perched atop it, and Gloriosa in the lead.

“Gloriosa!” Rayleigh greets brightly. “This certainly brings back memories!”

His reception is significantly warmer than Coin’s was, I note with a healthy dose of amusement.

“Why isn’t she that nice to me?” Coin mutters dejectedly.

“You know why, you big idiot,” Rayleigh snickers back, cuffing the back of Coin’s head.

“Rayleigh!” Sandersonia and Marigold gasp, moving forward to meet him.

“Ahh, you girls too, what a reunion!” Rayleigh continues laughing.

“Luffy, you’re finally awake!” Hancock cries, completely ignoring Rayleigh in favour of fawning over my Captain. I don’t bother hiding my snort. She turns her eyes on me for a single moment of flat staring, then jerks her head the opposite direction. “And I suppose you’re also awake,” she says, like it physically pains her.

Good *god.*

“You guys know old man Rayleigh too?” Luffy asks instead of acknowledging Hancock. “Wait is this food for us?!”

I shuffle over to Hancock with a lopsided and awkward smile. “Heeeeeeeeey Princess, can we have a talk? Let’s have a talk,” I suggest, herding her off to the side with a waving hand.

“What do we need to *talk* about?” Hancock scoffs, still looking anywhere but my eyes.

“Sweet mercy,” I mutter under my breath. “Ok so like I’m gonna level with you, we gotta talk about Luffy and your uh. General behaviour,” I say frankly, putting my hand on my hip once we’re a good distance away.

Her entire face blows out red. “Wh — why I never! My — you — how dare you!”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah ok. So real talk, you’re a grown ass woman and that’s my young adult husband over there, and you gotta stop please,” I lay out simply.

She makes a face at me. “How I act in regards to someone is none of your business, if you ask me,” she says haughtily.

I make a face back at her. “When you’re being creepy to my — again — *husband,* yes that’s my business?”

“I am not being *creepy,”* Hancock says in complete offense.

“You low-key are,” I deadpan. “I have no problem if you admire him as a person, let’s be so for real I’m in constant awe of the guy, but the being in love with him thing is just straight weird. You’re straight *weird* about it.”

Hancock’s face cycles through a bunch of emotions rapid fire fast. “I *do* admire him as a person,” she says eventually, half-confused and half-begrudging.

I cock an eyebrow at her. “Is that where it ends?”

Her expression turns frustrated. “How in the hell should I know?! I’ve never more than tolerated a man before!”

I sigh and wipe my hand down my face. “Ok, so *why* exactly have you decided that *this* was the approach then?”

I’d almost call her look sheepish, if it wasn’t also condescending and dismissive. “I — well, that is… Gloriosa said it was love sickness,” she states, going from blustering to a more subdued mumbling.

I stare at her blankly for a moment. “Are you telling me you decided you’re in love with him because someone just kinda… said that?”

Hancock sneers at me, despite the blush returning to her cheeks more in embarrassment this time. “Well it’s not like there’s many sources clamouring to explain my own feelings to me around here, is there?” she scoffs imperiously.

“Lord give me patience,” I mutter to the sky before looking back to her. “You’ve got other women on the island you admire, right? People you think highly of?”

This also makes her face screw up. “…Yes,” she spits out reluctantly.

“Ok, when you completely ignore their genders and just think about them in terms of their character, are the vibes and or feeling similar?” I ask exasperatedly.

She stares hard at a spot just to my left for a long moment, face unreadable. “…Ah,” she says eventually, stiff.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Ok, great, so glad we sorted that out,” I groan, rubbing between my eyes. “Now if you could just treat him like a person you respect, that would be fantastic.”

“…And that entails..?” she asks awkwardly.

“Just… I dunno, not fawning over him and acting like a psycho?” I respond unsurely. “This isn’t exactly a problem I’ve dealt with before? Just like… be nice to him I guess? Fucking hell I am not the right person to be giving advice.”

“Well you know what you’re doing more than I,” she mutters derisively.

I roll my eyes again. “I don’t know if you know this, but literally everyone else in the world has to figure out how to act like a person people like. This is a thing we all learn how to do.”

Hancock scowls at me. “I am a person people like.”

I stare at her for a beat. “…For your personality?” I ask doubtfully. That’s a little mean but like. C’mon. When her face twists in rage I wave my hand frantically. “Look I’m sure people like you for who you are, just maybe try being nice to *everyone* every once in a while? It might be good for you!”

“I can’t afford that,” she denies stiffly.

I soften a little. “Yeah… yeah, I get it. But there *are* people who aren’t gonna take advantage of your kindness. Just… start with the people you trust. Your sisters, Gloriosa, hell no one on this island would think less of you if you just… stopped being an asshole for a change.”

“I’m not an asshole,” she squawks.

“Uh huh,” I hum disbelievingly. “Look you can keep being a dick to *me* if that makes you more comfortable, I can take it, and what you do in your personal time is none of my

business. Just a thought, yaknow?"

She mumbles something under her breath I can't quite hear.

"What's up?" I ask, leaning in to listen better. "I didn't catch that."

Hancock glowers at me again for a second before registering she's looking *at* me and directing the look above my head. "I… do admire you, too," she admits begrudgingly, looking pained.

"Gee, thanks Princess," I mutter. "The constipated look on your face really shows you mean it."

She makes a deeply frustrated sound and her arm shoots out faster than I can flinch away from. Instead of slapping me across the face like I was mostly expecting, she just snatches my un-fucked wrist and forefully shakes my hand before tossing it like it burned her.

I stare. She glares at the treeline. I look down at my hand with a puzzled expression. She makes a strangled noise high in her throat. I arch a single eyebrow very high at her.

"Shut up," she demands.

"I didn't say shit," I retort.

"Your face is very loud," she informs me disgustedly.

"You have no idea how to function like a normal human being," I tell her flatly, unflinchingly honest.

Hancock makes another offended sound and I roll my eyes a third time, letting a smile touch my mouth. She manages a whole three seconds of eye contact this time before she needs to look away, and I'm willing to count that as progress.

"I will keep this conversation in mind," she announces woodenly.

I shrug. "Great. Good talk Princess, very productive. Am I allowed to eat that food?"

Hancock eyes me for a beat, then shrugs an elegant shoulder. "Yes."

"Amazing!" I cheer, then spin on my heel to skip towards where Luffy and Ace have fully dug into the feast.

I hear her follow behind a moment later.

"This is like, *really* good," Ace informs me as I join him and his brother.

"Yeah? They have any of those omelette/burrito/dumpling/crepes?" I ask, snatching up a handful of grapes and popping them in my mouth.

"Fucken *what?"* he asks confusedly.

"They don't, I looked!" Luffy reports dutifully through his mouthful of food.

I shove his hat down his face. "Damn. Too bad."

"What were you and the princess talkin' about?" Ace asks, passing me some meat Luffy hasn't managed to inhale yet.

I shrug. “World’s most bullshit microtherapy session?”

Ace laughs before there’s a voice behind us. “Mind if I have a bite of that? It’s been a long trip.”

All three of us startle, whipping towards the brit in our midst and gaping.

“Well?” Sabo prompts, smiling easily and completely unbothered.

Chapter End Notes

Lmao. Love Sabo because he's just a Guy who Shows Up Places, whether you want him to or not. My hero frfr.

Also yeah this is the take I'm going with for Hancock, c'est la vie this is where we exist emotionally.

JIMBEEEEEEEEEEEI BREIF RETURN OF THE KING YEEEEEEEEES!!! I love him so much.

And RAYLEIGH AND COIN REUNION!!! Oh the subtext and shit ooooooh... oooh all the stuff you aren't privy too and Lore™ and history ooooooooooh..... I'm so normal about these old men can you tell? Can you tell?????

Anyway byeeeeeeee see you on our next regularly scheduled Sunday update on the 3rd ♥♥♥

Chapter 139: Chapter One Hundred and Thirty Nine: The Sun Will Rise And We Will Try Again

Chapter Summary

Truce - twenty one pilots

Ace greets his long lost brother by lobbing a fruit at his head.

Chapter Notes

My dumbass CANNOT decide on a name for the series so that's why this work hasn't been put into it yet, but I WILL do it and that IS where the sequel and interim oneshot thingy will go when we get there I SWEAR TO GOD —

Homegirl I am riding this depressive spiral like a bull and by god am I the prettiest princess at the rodeo. The Audacity and the Vyvanse will see me through, TRUST.

Anyway enjoy the chapter :):):)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ace greets his long lost brother by lobbing a fruit at his head.

Sabo catches it, the asshole, grinning wide and taking a bite. “Thanks a million, it has been *such* a trip.”

“Where the genuine *fuck* did you come from?” I ask incredulously.

Sabo just smiles genially without answering. Prick.

“Sabo!” Luffy cheers, then bodily throws himself at him. Sabo catches him no problem — in fact he hoists him up in one arm, hooked under his thighs like he’s carrying a toddler instead

of a whole entire gangly ass 17 year old.

Ace just stares at them both for a second. Then he heaves a great sigh, rounds the corner of the wagon, and reels Sabo into a hug from the side Luffy isn't clinging to.

Sabo laughs, clear and bright, hooking an arm around Ace's neck and squeezing. Ace drops his head onto Sabo's shoulder, and I can see the way Sabo's placid smile wavers for a moment. His eye catches mine, and I offer him an attempt at a reassuring look and a thumbs up.

Sabo's expression equalizes. His hand comes up to ruffle roughly through Ace's hair, eliciting a squawk. "You know I feel like I remember you taller," he says teasingly. "And ruder."

"I'm perfectly nice, fuck you very much," Ace scoffs, picking his head back up and taking a small step back, though not pulling away entirely. "And I'm plenty tall, I don't wanna hear that from you!"

"I'm taller," Sabo says, perfectly poised and cocky.

"What?! No you're not!" Ace immediately denies, then actually looks and baulks.

"I've got a whole inch of height on you, Ace," Sabo jeers, leaning down mockingly and levelling his hand between their heads. "Should I start calling you little brother too, then?"

"Wh — Don't you fucking dare!" Ace screeches.

"Is it not true?" Sabo taunts.

"No!" Ace hollers, grabbing Sabo by the lapels and shaking. "You — I'm still older!"

Sabo throws his head back and cackles. *"You're* the one who said I was your twin brother when we were kids!"

"'Twin brother' my ass," Ace grumbles under his breath. *"I'm* fucking older."

I've gotta laugh at them, because *honestly,* there is no other choice.

"You're not helping!" Ace yelps, shoving Sabo away from himself with a palm to the face — him and Luffy both jostle a step to the side, laughing — and pointing an accusing finger at me. "No one here is helpful! EVER!"

"Excuse you, I'm plenty helpful!" I gasp in mock outrage.

"Me too! Just ask them, I'm very competent!" Sabo adds, gesturing at me.

"Yeah, he was doing all kinds of great shit on Marineford!" I agree enthusiastically.

"I swear to god, are you the one I saw shooting Ed out of a cannon?!" Ace demands, brandishing what looks like a pineapple at Sabo threateningly.

"Hey now, Lewis helped with that too," I protest.

"Who the fuck is Lewis?!" Ace shrieks.

"I'm also the one who blew up the plaza," Sabo adds, a touch petulant. "At least make my rap sheet an accurate accounting of events."

There's something so abstractly absurd and hilarious about this man needing his mild act of terrorism recognized alongside the circus behaviour that was launching me from a cannon that throws me headlong into hysterical wheezing.

I clutch at the edge of the wagon and cackle, listening as Ace and Sabo snipe back and forth at each other while Luffy laughs at them too.

"Really, though," Sabo eventually manages, slightly apologetic, straightening like he doesn't still have an entire human in his arm. "I missed you. And I think you're an idiot. And we need to have a looooong conversation and catch up, but I've got something to attend to first."

We all raise an eyebrow at him. "Oh?"

"It took me longer than I would have liked to cross the Calm Belt; I have a call slot in a few minutes, but I was hoping to get more catching-up in before then," he sighs sadly. "Oh well, it'll just have to wait 'till after."

"Call slot?" I ask curiously.

Sabo nods. "All of Baltigo's calls go through the White Transponder so they can't be traced, so we have set times they'll call us to limit the chance of interference as much as possible, and forward any calls to whoever we're trying to reach so we basically piggyback off the secure line," he explains easily. "It comes with the caveat that the line could be dropped abruptly in case of an emergency call taking priority, but we make do."

I cock my head. "Huh. Guess I never considered that."

Sabo just shrugs. "We kind of had to. If we're not covering our asses at every turn the WG is gonna take a bite out of them, and we really can't afford it." His face softens a bit in a sheepish smile while he rubs the back of his neck. "I'm pretty much just checking in to confirm I didn't die, anyway. Mostly so Koala doesn't kill me." He mutters the last bit under his breath and I stifle a laugh.

I pause to think for a second then tilt my head the other direction. “I don’t suppose I could commandeer the rest of your timeslot to make a piggyback call, could I?”

Sabo pauses too, turning more fully so he can focus his good eye on me. “Oh? To whom, praytell?”

The corner of my mouth twitches up. “I wanna call Jonah, make sure he got out alright and let him know I’m not dead. Feels like the least I owe the guy after all the shit I put him through, yaknow?”

Sabo blinks twice before breaking into a smile and a laugh. “Fair enough! Good man, that Jonah. I’d actually like to ask him a question, if you wouldn’t mind.”

This time it’s my turn to blink twice. “Yeah sure, I’ve got no problem with that.”

Sabo foists Luffy into Ace’s arms in one smooth move — surprising him and nearly sending him to his ass as he squawks and overbalances, Luffy laughing and not making it any easier for him with his wriggling — and claps.

“Perfect! Shall we then?” he invites, gesturing a hand to a rock off to the side before plodding over and dropping himself to sit on it and patting the space next to him.

I take the seat gratefully. The standing situation will probably improve at *some point,* but that point is not now.

Sabo pulls a Transponder Snail out from his coat, I have genuinely no idea where he was keeping that, and places it on another stone before balancing his elbows on his knees and resting his chin on the heels of his gloved hands. He turns to face me directly with a smile ten times too bright and cheerful for it not to be an evil trap.

I scoot half an inch back.

It somehow makes his smile bigger.

"So," he says, tone deceptively pleasant, "I believe I promised you a threatening talk, no?"

I let out a nervous giggle. "Hm. Well, I think Ace covered everything in *his* talk if you'd rather spare yourself the trouble…" I offer shiftily, pointing back to where Ace and Luffy have devolved into some kind of arm wrestling contest with their heads bashed together while they shittalk.

Goddamn weirdos.

Sabo hums a light note, fingers tapping contemplatively along his cheek. "I don't know… I was kind of looking forward to it, you know?"

Mercy of all mercies, the Transponder rings.

Sabo lets it for a second, continuing to stare unnervingly and unblinking at me before reaching out to pick up the receiver without breaking eye contact. "Hello," he greets pleasantly.

There's a distinct pause from the other side of the line. "I don't want to know," whoever it is mutters under their breath. "Operator, to whom am I speaking?" the person asks.

"COSS-3, Operator, at your service," he answers smoothly, finally breaking stare to actually turn his attention to the Transponder. I do not sag in relief. I *don't.*

"Perfect, COSS-3, just checking in? What's your status?" the Operator questions.

“Yes, checking in,” he agrees. “I’m perfectly fine, I should be back on-base before the next code cycle so no need to worry about that. And if I’m not, just give me a ring.”

“Just so,” the Operator hums neatly. “Will that be all?”

“Not quite,” Sabo says with a shake of his head. The snail raises an eyebrow. “I’m here with UAEDD-5, I’d like to make an outgoing call if you don’t mind.”

Girl what the fuck is a UAEDD-5.

The snail blinks slowly like it has the same question. “Wh… give me a moment,” the Operator mumbles, followed by the rifling of paper and a repeated mutter of the letters. “Oh. OH! *Really?* Ok then. Sure,” they say incredulously. “Number for the outgoing call, please?”

Sabo looks to me and I rattle off the familiar string of numbers.

“Perfect, please remember any and all conversation you have may be monitored for the security of sensitive information, and your call will be automatically dropped if you remain on the line exceeding your time slot,” the Operator recites, like a practiced spiel. “You have 28 minutes remaining, have a nice day.” The snail’s mouth twitches into a mischievous smile. “Oh, and I’ll let Koala know you checked in, Chief. *Only* a whole day late.”

“Hey now —” Sabo starts protestingly, but the snail makes a noise and its expression goes blank for a moment. It starts blinking its eyes like it’s making a call, without the usual accompanying sounds, and then there’s a click and the snail’s expression clarifies once more.

“…Hello?” Jonah’s voice says trepidatiously.

“Jonah!” I cheer.

The snail blinks rapidly before breaking out into a grin. “Ed! Oh you fucking *asshole,* are you alive?!” he demands.

“Oh yeah, no corpses hitting up your line around here,” I confirm brightly. “I assume the same goes for you? You got off Marienford in time, you’re ok?”

The snail looks like it relaxes a bit. “Yeah, I was evacuated to Sabaody a couple hours before the fighting even started,” he sighs, the snail’s face scrunching like he’s pinching between his eyes. “A majority of the IBD was — Fergus says hi, by the way — and the couple that were still on-base have made it in safely.”

My shoulders relax a little too. “Oh, that’s good. Tell Fergus I say hi, too.”

There’s a meaningful pause as the snail looks at me judgementally. “Speaking of, you wanna tell me *why* exactly Lewis was asking me if you were some kind of evil trickster spirit from the deep?” Jonah asks, sounding very far past the point of being incredulous over anything I might have a hand in.

“Um. No reason?” I laugh a little awkwardly, exchanging a glance with Sabo he grimaces at. “He’s uh. Like, ok too though, yeah?”

Jonah makes an aggrieved sound. “Yeah, aside from the freshly packaged trauma and claustrophobia, he’s swell,” he drawls sarcastically. “Can you *please* stop radicalizing all my coworkers, the Marines aren’t going to *have* an IBD if you keep going at this rate.”

Sabo barks out a laugh and the snail settles into a resigned expression. “You have my apologies on that one,” Sabo says, not sounding very apologetic at all. “I did slap one and tell him point blank he was being radicalized.”

“I’m aware,” Jonah says thinly. “Marmon is very proud of surviving getting slapped by, and I quote, ‘the scariest fucking probably-man I’ve ever been trapped in an enclosed space with.’”

Sabo starts cackling again because he's a jerk like that, and I roll my eyes. "Anyway," I say, deliberately loud. "At this point I can't even fathom why you were a Marine in the first place."

"You wanna know why I joined the Marines?" Jonah prompts.

I raise my eyebrows and blink. "Why?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"Because they have good pay and a fucking dental plan," he deadpans. I fight back a snort so powerful I just fucking *know* it would put me on my ass groaning in pain.

"I've got a question, in that case," Sabo cuts in neatly. We both — me and the snail, that is — turn our attention to him. "Well, an offer, actually. If pay and dental aren't cutting it for you."

I catch on before Jonah does, and this time *I* start cackling.

"You — *no,"* Jonah says with dawning horror. "Oh don't you DARE. Do NOT give me a recruitment speech!"

"I don't need to give you the speech *now* per say," Sabo demurs.

"What the fuck," Jonah whines in mortification. "Why? Literally *why?"*

"I think you'd be good at it. Or at least like it," Sabo answers easily. Jonah makes a dismayed noise. "If you were interested," Sabo adds with a shrug. "We don't have dental *exactly,* but we do have a dentist on sight who'll do whatever if you bribe her well enough."

"What constitutes as 'enough?'" Jonah asks warily.

“A bottle of scotch or a funny shaped rock usually does the trick,” Sabo answers unhesitatingly. Jonah makes a pained sound so devoid of soul I nearly wince.

“Is this how all your recruitment attempts go?” I question Sabo.

He shrugs again. “More or less. I’ll let you think on it, I know how to reach you. I’ll leave you both to your conversation.”

Sabo rises to his feet and steps back towards where Ace and Luffy have devolved even further into some fucked up form of thumbwars — which Luffy is playing entirely by himself, because Ace appears to only be just coming to from a bout of narcolepsy — before pausing and giving me a sideways glance.

“And we’ll have *our* conversation later,” he promises with a sweet smile.

I full body shiver. It’s *creepy.*

Then Sabo jaunts away, scruffing both of his brothers by the necks and dragging them off.

“God that guy is scary. Cool as fuck, but scary,” I mutter.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him but I hope it isn’t as contagious as whatever it is you have,” Jonah mumbles. I choose not to be offended. It’s a personal choice.

“Anyway, I wanted to thank you,” I say, steering the conversation back on track.

The snail’s brow furrows. “For what?

“I’m really proud of you for trying to stop Blackbeard,” I answer sincerely.

The snail goes red. “Yeah well, bang up job I did of that. Really, don’t thank me, it hardly did anything,” he refutes.

“It did *enough,”* I insist. “I had no right to drag you into that mess, but you went anyway, and that means a lot to me. You’re a really fucking good friend, Jonah.”

There’s a moment of silence before Jonah breaks it.

“I was raised by my aunt, you know,” he says as a non sequitur.

I blink. “Yeah?”

The snail nods. “Yeah. My cousin too, to an extent. He went off and joined a merchant sailing company and ended up stranded and living on the Grand Line, funnily enough.”

I blink more. “Uh, how?”

He grins crookedly. “It was this whole fuckass adventure, from what he tells us. Got kidnapped by pirates and dropped off on some island, and he can’t exactly charter a way back himself, and if he tried to hitch a ride back with *more* pirates my aunt might skin him.”

I bark a startled peel of laughter. “I — wow. Huh, I uh. I really don’t know much about you, do I?” I say quietly, faintly rueful.

Jonah makes a sound that could be a scoff or a snort. “No, guess not. To be fair, I don’t know a whole lot about you either. Besides the obvious, I mean.”

“The obvious, huh,” I mumble to myself, thumbing my ear.

“Anyway, I never knew my parents,” he continues easily. “Or if I did I don’t remember them. Not sure what happened to them either, since my aunt would never say.”

I sober at his words. “Oh. Shit, Jonah.”

The snail makes a vague sound like he’s waving a hand. “It’s not something that bothers me,” he dismisses. “Honestly, I’ve always kind of suspected they ran off as pirates at the beginning of the era, but as far as I’m concerned it’s none of my business.”

I frown a bit. “Fair enough, I guess.”

The snail shakes its head a little. “Anyway, the point I’m trying to make. I was raised pretty fast and loose, it was always *encouraged* for me to stay on the straight and narrow, but my cousin mucked that example up pretty quick, so I was a pretty ‘make a living, be happy, and don’t get killed’ teen.”

“And then the Marines snatched you up?” I ask a little wryly.

“And then the Marines snatched me up,” he echoes. “I’m good with patterns, they have good pay and benefits. It was convenient, yaknow? I could stay in Loguetown and wouldn’t have to ship out to the frontlines anywhere, since my branch of the IBD has been ‘temporarily’ based out of there since before I even joined up.” There’s a brief pause before Jonah makes a sound of pure offence. “Goddamnit the base was demolished and those fucking renovations never even got finished —”

I laugh, because this is Jonah and his incredulity and aggrievement will never not make me laugh.

“You’re a lot like my cousin, yaknow?” he continues.

My eyebrows go up. “Really?”

“Yeah, you’re both bullheaded idiots constantly getting into shit,” he says dryly. I make a half-offended, half-acquiescing noise. “But — you always *help.* When you can, you always help. And we are. Friends, I mean. You’re my friend and you’ve *somehow* managed to get me to care about you, and you’re doing important shit, and… well.”

“Jonah…” I mumble, feeling soft and mushy.

“I’m glad to help you, Ed,” he states, firm and with complete certainty. “In anything you ever need, I’m glad to help. Because we’re friends and it’s important to me that I *can* help you. So… thanks.”

“Don’t make me cry on this fucking call,” I sniff warningly, trying very hard to blink the gathering wetness out of my eyes. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Jonah laughs. “No promises. You know through that whole ordeal, whenever I had to do something insane or crazy or really out there, I just kept thinking ‘do it for Ed.’”

I blink twice. “Hah?”

He chuckles a little. “Sounds kinda stupid, but it… helped, yaknow? Because I knew I was doing that dumb shit to help you, and it couldn’t possibly be more dumb than whatever you *yourself* were doing.”

“I think I’m touched by this, but it’s hard to say,” I tell him, aggrieved.

“You’re a really fucking good friend too, Ed,” he says simply.

I smile despite myself. “Thank you, Jonah,” I say again, wholehearted and heartfelt. The snail smiles back.

“Anyway,” he says roughly. “Is that all you called for?”

I roll my eyes. “I also wanted to let you know I’m going off grid for a while. Figured I’d let you know, so it doesn’t freak you out.”

He narrows his eyes suspiciously. “How long is a while?”

“A couple years..?” I say, high pitched.

The snail makes a long, long, *looooooooooong* sigh. “I,” Jonah says imperiously. “DON’T want to know. I really truly don’t.”

“As Sun Tzu said in The Art of War; ‘the wheels of justice grind slow but grind fine,’” I offer cheerily.

“I don’t want to know. Shut up. Never call this number again.”

_____

I find the boys perched on an off-to-the-side jut of rock, cliffing over the shore of Amazon Lily. They’re sat cross legged and talking animatedly, their backs to me and a short rock with little red sake saucers behind them, and wreathed in gold from where the sun hangs low on the horizon.

I lope over at a leisurely pace, Sabo’s Transponder cradled in my good arm.

They all seem so much more… relaxed. Settled. It’s something I’d noticed, from before Sabo arrived.

That Luffy and Ace seemed settled together, it just being the two of them — but every so often one of them would look over their shoulder with a little bit of a start. Like they remembered that someone else was supposed to be there, and they're not surprised there isn't, before they seemed to get hit with a tiny hit of anticipation like a static shock.

Like they forgot Sabo wasn't there, realized why he wasn't, then remembered that he *could be* over and over again. It hadn't really clicked, before. What they were doing. But now every time they look over their shoulders Sabo is *right there,* no break in the routine or trip in their dialogue.

It's… it's nice.

"I'm assuming you're all behaving yourselves?" I ask lightly, setting the snail on the rock and peering down at them.

"I *always* behave myself, and even if I wasn't, YOU certainly could lecture me on it," Ace says snootily.

I snort and cuff him on the head, ignoring his squawk of outrage.

"Good call?" Sabo asks.

I smile. "Good call," I confirm.

"I know it was my decision, but I'm gonna miss not seeing anybody for two years," Luffy groans, sprawling out across the ground.

I go to sit down next to Ace before pausing as I have a thought. Then I'm slumping onto Ace with an upset noise of my own. "Maaan, we're gonna have to postpone the Dream Blunt

Rotation for at *least* two years! Goddamnit, Sanji's fucken weed is gonna go bad sitting on the Sunny!" I moan.

"Does weed go bad?" Ace asks with a furrow in his brow.

"It loses potency over time," I explain in a dejected whine. "It's *Sanji,* so I don't doubt he's got that shit preserved in an airtight jar or some shit so it won't be *bad* bad, it just won't be as good as it *could* be."

"We can always get new weed for it," Ace points out.

I pout. "It's about the principle of the matter," I say petulantly. "We said we'd smoke with Sanji's weed and now Sanji's weed is gonna be trash. It's just *sad."*

"Cope," Sabo suggests sweetly. I flip him off.

"If I wasn't so sure you could snap every bone in my body, I'd kill you," I mutter.

"Seconded," Luffy grumbles into the dirt.

"Thirded. Is that a word?" Ace adds.

"Why are we all trying to kill *me* now?" Sabo complains. "This was NOT the dynamic. I demand a refund."

"Well we can't go back to trying to kill Luffy, *look at him,"* Ace says, gesturing to where Luffy has turned his head to beam wet puppy dog eyes up at us.

"It was ONE time," Sabo says with emphasis.

“Brothers aren’t supposed to kill each other,” Luffy states impetuously.

I make an uncertain sound. “Yeah no, that’s pretty standard sibling behaviour. My sister was an asshole when we were kids, the fact you’ve only got ONE instance of attempted murder is actually pretty good.”

“I think that’s mostly because you’re you,” Ace says snidely.

“I can’t argue with that,” I mumble unhappily. “I stared death in the eye and that fucker LAUGHED AT ME.”

I see the way both Luffy and Ace try to hide winces at that and immediately feel bad.

“Don’t joke about it,” Ace requests, pulling his arms in as his face twists up in something nearing grief or anger.

I frown. “Hey —”

“NO,” Ace cuts me off, turning to face me fully. “You — it wasn’t a joke, it — you — Maybe I don’t want to hear you make light of you getting yourself killed for me, how about that.”

“I didn’t get myself killed for you,” I refute, sitting up and straightening my back. “You — damnit, don’t make yourself feel guilty about this!”

His face twists further. “I’m not *feeling guilty* about it, it was literally my fault! It only happened because of choices *I* made, not yours —”

“No,” I snap with as much force as I can make myself use. It makes him flinch back despite himself. “Everything is always out of my hands, but this — this choice — this was mine. I

made this choice. So I'm going to hold on to it as tightly as I possibly can, and no one, not even you, is going to take that from me."

There's a moment of ringing silence before Sabo lets out a low whistle.

I let my shoulders drop from their defensive tilt and rub my hand over my face. "I have control issues, and I know that," I say evenly. "And I know damn well I'm not the only one. But all the decisions that got made belong to the people who made them, and everything else is just *circumstance.* Can we agree to that?"

Ace's expression is slightly mutinous for a moment before he lets it smooth out with a heavy sigh. "…Yeah," he says quietly. "I can agree to that."

"Thank you," I say softly.

"Sorry," he adds after a beat, then holds his arm up. "Stop sitting like that, the line of your back is making *mine* hurt."

I smile a little and shake my head, slumping back down into his side again. "Yaknow what?" I murmur, laying my head on his shoulder. "Maybe the real One Piece is the fucking therapsit I'm sending all of us to when this is over."

That gets a laugh out of all of them. Luffy worms his hand into mine and I clutch it gratefully.

"We all make kinda shit choices," Ace decides. It gets a laugh out of all of us again. "We need to work on making better ones, I'm not kidding."

"Tomorrow."

All three of the boy's eyes turn to me at the word. It's Sabo that makes a questioning hum.

“We can always try again tomorrow,” I expand.

I hold Luffy’s hand tight in my own, hip pressed firmly into Ace’s. We stare out at the sea, at the shores of Amazon Lily and the Sea Kings breaking through the surface of the water in the distance.

I commit the sunset to memory, feeling my cheeks bend with a smile as the sun flashes green when it reaches into the horizon.

“Keep your hope.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure that final line has no sprawling meaning or implications that will become apparent in the final chapter. Totally.

What was that??? Jonah backstory?????? You weren't expecting THAT now were you. IBD you will always be famous to me ♥

It's my birthday on Tuesday yaaaaaaaaaay. CANNOT BELIEVE I started writing this when I was 18 and now it's gonna end when I'm 21 that's sickening. Thanks SSSBMTY for consuming my brain for too damn many years, I guess. Fucking hell. I'll see you all for the final chapter of Surely Some Star Binds Me To You (at least for the first stretch of our journey) in two weeks time. I love y'all ♥♥♥

Chapter 140: Chapter One Hundred and Forty: As Your Shrinking Figure Blows A Kiss

Chapter Summary

Sweet Dream, TN - The Last Shadow Puppets

"Had I not sworn the very fabric of my existence to your wellbeing, my *GOD* I'd *murder you,"* I grumble under my breath, turning my attention to the beach as we approach.

Chapter Notes

The fact this fic is nearly 600k words long is fucking baffling to me. What the fuck kind of crack cocaine do they have me on.

This is one of my all time favourite songs, of course I put it here. Just wait until we get to the Miracle Aligner chapter, OH BOY. And the Divine Loser chapter? YOU AREN'T READY, Wano will kick your ASS. Well, we're a long ways off from that.

For the last time in a while, y'all ready to get into it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You know the worst part about this? It's becoming normal to me. And this normal kind of feels like ass.

Note to self: sleeping in a pile on a sparsely-grassed cliff actually fucking *sucks*.

"I think I displaced the bottom two rungs of my ribcage," I groan, trying very hard not to turn my head and set off a cramp that'll have me looking to the left at a 60° angle for the next ten minutes.

Someone had come and covered us up with blankets at some point in the night, but they did fuck all in terms of back support.

Vindictively, I'm glad it's not just me suffering. Ace is pouting and rubbing at his lower back, and Sabo seems to be having more trouble than he should getting his feet to work in his chunky goth boots.

"It wasn't *that* bad," Luffy laughs, perfectly bouncy and animated despite the state of the rest of us.

I point an accusing finger at him. "You would've been fine if you slept with your neck at a perfect right angle, shut your fuck up."

"Yeah Luffy, shut your fuck," Ace seconds.

"This sounds like a skill issue to me," Luffy whistles, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Who taught you that?" I demand.

"You taught me that," Luffy immediately replies.

Fuck girl did I do that? Goddamnit. Dumbass decision on my part.

"Had I not sworn the very fabric of my existence to your wellbeing, my *GOD* I'd *murder you,"* I grumble under my breath, turning my attention to the beach as we approach.

The Boa sisters and Gloriosa are back and talking with Rayleigh again, Jimbei hanging at the edge of the conversation, with a new cart of food to the side that Coin is currently pillaging fruit from while shooting pathetic kicked puppy looks over at where Gloriosa is completely ignoring him.

Law's ship is also gone, vanished from the shores of Amazon Lily at some point when we weren't paying attention, or sometime while we were still asleep.

"Coin better have gotten my shit before Law left, the Hokage was still in there," I mutter to myself.

Ace makes a questioning hum, craning his neck down to hear me better. Ass.

"Law fucked off and didn't even say a final heartfelt farewell, the dickhead," I complain at a normal volume. "For a guy committed so thoroughly to a motif, he sure does shy away from the heartfelt stuff *a lot."*

At that point Coin finally seems to notice our approach, head perking up in our direction and breaking out into a grin and a wave when he sees us.

"Oh good, you're up!" he calls cheerfully, sauntering over at a leisurely pace while the rest of the contingent give us waves of varying enthusiasm.

"Morning," I greet, submitting to the hair ruffles and noisy kiss he smacks onto my forehead with minimal complaint.

Behind him I can see that the rest of the group have gone back to their conversation easily enough, but Hancock is still looking over at us with an almost contemplative expression. When her eyes meet mine she does a full body twitch, then turns her nose up with a huff and jerks her head the other way.

She still turns red with embarrassment, though.

I have a moment of empathy for her, from an aromantic perspective. In a 'trying to brainwash yourself into having romantic feelings for someone because that's the societal expectation' way, and an understanding of how platonic feelings can feel twisted up inside you when

you're only getting a specific kind of outside pressure, and other explanations aren't made readily available.

I'm surprising myself with how much I feel for Boa Hancock. Considering how much of a BITCH she is.

Then again, I'm kind of a bitch too.

…Oh god I can't believe I've almost conned myself into liking a woman who kicks baby seals. What the fuck is wrong with me. Goddamnit my taste in friends is SO fucking terrible.

"If you folks don't mind, I'll be stealing your silly guy so we can get this message prettified to terrorize the government," Coin says brightly, scruffing Luffy and trotting off. "Thanks, bye!"

"I — what the fuck," I deadpan, hand half extended after them before I redirect it to pinch between my eyes. "Terrible taste, *terrible fucking taste,"* I hiss under my breath.

"On that note, I think it's time for our chat," Sabo says lightly, clapping a hand that should NOT be that immovable onto my shoulder with a smile that screams DANGER.

"Chat?" Ace questions.

I point at him. "No, you already got your chat. No do-overs!"

"What chat?" Ace asks after us, at a complete loss as Sabo steers me off to the side with that iron grip.

"This really does feel unnecessary," I chuckle, trying to hide my nerves and probably not doing a good job.

“I suppose we shall see,” he says, still somehow managing to sound both lighthearted and ominous as fuck.

Sabo brings us to a solid stop, spinning me around to face him and planting both hands on my shoulders (still careful of my burn, thank god) to pin me in place. He still has that evil, evil benign smile plastered on, but there is fucking *nothing* behind those eyes.

“I’ll cut to the chase,” he leads with. “The amount of ways I know how to kill a human being are, frankly, astounding. Now, I like you. I would honestly prefer not to hurt you, especially in any way that could get… *messy.”*

“You are so fucking intimidating dude, I promise you do *not* need to be doing all this in addition to the sheer force of your aura,” I wheeze.

Sabo shrugs. “Maybe I enjoy it.”

“Maybe you need a new hobby,” I mumble dejectedly.

“Anyway,” he continues precisely. “I trust that you have no ill intentions toward my little brother,” this he says like a threat, “but I have no objections to planning a perfectly crafted thematically rich and incredibly dramatic death for you, if it comes to that.”

I don’t know how the actual threat part was less threatening than the first half of the sentence, but needless to say I am impressed. And afraid. *I already know how fucking competent he is.*

I scoff anyway. “Luffy’s gonna kill me one day, it’s *literally* part of our vows now, so you really don’t have to worry about that.”

The look Sabo gives me searching, judgemental and distantly curious among the regard and appraisal. Then he sighs. “Unfortunately, the devotion and care you two have for each other

is *painfully* obvious —”

“The fuck you mean *‘unfortunately,’”* I butt in incredulously.

“— *SO,”* he resumes loudly, like I didn’t say anything, “I am willing to leave well enough alone.”

I pause. “Wait really?” I ask, blinking rapidly.

“For now,” he says, sharp and crisp. “As my baby brother’s partner and spouse, if you ever fuck it up, I’ll be on you like a dry field and fire.” Then his face softens some, and a smile that isn’t made out of fiberglass and evil spirits peeks through. “But as a person, I like you and wish you nothing but the best.”

I stare at him for a long moment, and he stares right back, and then I heave a sigh.

“You gonna crush my fingers if I offer a handshake?” I ask, already offering my hand regardless of what his answer will be.

Sabo’s smile is all teeth and barely restrained glee. “Does it matter?” he raises rhetorically, giving me a firm (but not finger crushing) shake before taking a step back and releasing me.

“So what would my thematic and dramatic death look like?” I question conversationally as we turn back to the main group.

Sabo shrugs again. “That’s for me to know and you to have nightmares about,” he states simply.

Well. Fair e-fucking-nough.

———

Sabo sets his sights on the cart of food as soon as he's had enough of putting the fear of god in me, which leaves me heading for where Coin and Luffy are standing and talking.

I see Coin ask him something, and him thinking about it hard for a long moment. Then Luffy says something in answer that makes Coin laugh. Wonder what that's about..?

Because of the way they're standing, I get a head on look at the bold letters and numbers stamped down Luffy's bicep in stark black. The calligraphy is impeccable, the lines smooth and sure from a professional's hand. Lines of flourish, swash and ligature curve about the piece, some branching off the 2Y and forming up into the X crossing out the 3D in artful sweeps.

It's familiar and yet foreign, it's been far too long since Coin has seen it for it to be a perfect recreation, and maybe that's what's so… nice about it.

Something not entirely new and still carrying the same meaning across the distance. It's poetic, or something. Full circle.

"What kind of dumbassery were you two chucklefucks talking about," I drawl with a raised eyebrow when I make it close enough.

"Nothing you gotta worry about, kid," Coin says brightly, draping an arm over my shoulders and guiding me away while shooing a hand at Luffy. "Your brother — not the off putting one — looked like he wanted to talk to you, you better go find him, hm?"

"Ok!" Luffy says, flashing a thumbs up before he's cantering off.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, alright. Sure. The fuck was that?"

“A surprise tool that’ll help us later,” Coin says cheekily.

“You shitdisturber,” I grumble under my breath, which just makes Coin laugh, because he’s a shitdisturber.

“Got all your stuff with Pontiac,” he says, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder towards the shore. “Picked it all up from tall dark and emotionally constipated before he took off.”

I snort hard enough at the name it makes my ribs twinge. “Hokage included?” I ask. “My black Transponder Snail, I mean.”

“Hokage included,” he confirms, grinning wide at the name.

I shake my head with a smile. “No idea how that bad bitch survived everything I did, but I am *thoroughly* impressed.”

Coin takes us on a walk in the direction of the shore at a meandering pace, stopping at the food cart thing to get me some breakfast before continuing in a companionable quiet.

“So. The Wisher King,” I say, breaking the silence and glancing up at Coin out of the corner of my eye. “That’s what it’s called, yeah?”

Coin pauses, steps slowing until we’ve stopped, looking grim and charmed both for all of a moment before sighing. “You spoke, then?” he asks, mouth twisting into something dour. “This truly was a *very* close call, then,” he adds a beat later, somber and near silent in its sorrow.

I tilt my head to look at him more fully. “It was,” I agree without sugarcoating it. “Shit happened. I’m still here. That’s the way it is.”

Coin huffs a sound that's half laugh. He puts a palm to my cheek and smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Yeah, kid," he murmurs quietly. "Doesn't change that shit happened, and the best I'm able to do is help you through the aftermath."

I close my eyes and lean into his hand, letting the hard edges of whatever tangled ball of feelings is choking up my chest push in for a moment, breath stuttering.

"I'm gonna help you," Coin promises, sure and determined and a little in awe — like he can't believe he gets the *privilege.*

I reach up and squeeze his hand, then duck under his arm and tuck myself into his side. "Thanks. Thank you," I manage, half-muffled into his shirt while I smooth out the edges of the tangle again.

Coin presses a kiss into the crown of my head. "Always," he assures, hands warm as they wrap around my back.

I let it linger around me for a beat, then separate myself from him before I start crying like a little bitch. "So, we just about ready to go?"

"Just about," he concedes, eyes flickering over my shoulder. "I think there's someone you gotta talk to first, though."

I turn to see Luffy as he makes his way over, something set in his expression. Coin gives me a quick squeeze on the shoulder and I glance back at him when he nods his head where he had pointed earlier. "I'll be getting Pontiac ready to go. You come meet me whenever you're ready," he says, then leaves with another brief squeeze.

I turn back to my Captain, ready to ask what's up, but he beats me to it.

"I don't want you to follow after me anymore," Luffy says, quiet and damning.

And I fucking *freeze.*

My immediate assumption is that he's had e-fucking-nough of me, and that little cry together we had after waking up and the whole misunderstanding about my motivation was the final straw.

I'm smarter than my assumptions, though. And I know Luffy better than that. And I… well, I guess I want to believe something nicer than that. I *do* believe something nicer than that.

"You don't *have* to follow," Luffy continues, low and adamant. "I can't — you disappear when I'm not — you don't —" he makes a frustrated noise that's more just a hard exhale.

I just stare at him.

"You don't have to follow," he repeats. "Just stay — stay with me. Be next to *me.* You don't need to be two steps behind, if you don't want to, I just want you right here."

I watch my Captain for a moment; the tempered steel determination in his eyes, the defiant set of his jaw, the barely-there apprehension betrayed by the furrow of his brows.

"Yeah," I breathe out eventually. "You said we gotta stick together forever, didn't you? And I'm not allowed to get too far out of your range."

I smile at him, something soft and sweet, then take his hand and lean down to press a kiss into his knuckles.

"You know me, Captain. I'd follow you beyond where stars form, and that's a choice I make willingly," I murmur into his skin, looking up and raising my eyes to meet his. "I keep telling you, every step of the way. And if you want those steps side by side, I'm alright with that."

The black pools of Luffy's eyes dance as he leans down and pulls his hand up in one move, thunking our heads together. "Ok," he says, almost hushed.

My smile stretches wider. "I'll just have to keep working hard, so I can get strong enough to stand right there at the front with you."

Luffy twists our hands so he can hook our pinkies together, eyes sparkling and all but beaming at me. "Promise?" he asks cheekily.

"Promise," I return, feeling fit to burst with affection.

We just smile at each other for a beat, basking in the warmth of it. Then…

"I'm still the Captain though. I'm still in charge," Luffy tacks on petulantly.

I laugh, smile growing teeth as I shove him lightly. "Then you better work your ass off so I don't upstage you, hah?"

Luffy squawks, shoving me right back. *"Obviously!* I'm gonna be King of the Pirates, as if you *could!"*

I throw my head back and laugh harder.

———

When we make it down to where Coin said he'd be waiting, everyone save for the younger Boa sisters and Gloriosa have loosely gathered up.

We reach Rayleigh, Coin and Sabo first, just catching the tail end of their conversation.

“And you’re sure you don’t need a ride out of here?” Coin asks.

“No, I’m all covered. I’ll be heading back to the RA shortly, just after I finish up here,” Sabo says, shaking his head with an easy smile.

“Suit yourself,” Rayleigh shrugs before noticing us. “Ah, good, you’re here.”

“That we are,” I reply.

“Catch you later Detective,” Sabo says as he steps off to the side, touches the top of Luffy’s head as he goes, then gives me a two fingered salute as he heads for where Ace is waiting.

“We’ll head out after you guys, see if we can’t give you a bit of a headstart before we hit Marineford,” Rayleigh explains, dipping his chin at Coin and I. “Maybe our little performance will draw some heat off you in the process.”

“We shouldn’t have much trouble, but me and Pontiac will make sure everything goes smooth,” Coin promises with a grin, slinging an arm over Rayleigh’s shoulder.

“Thanks old guy! And, uh, other old guy!” Luffy says. I resist the urge to facepalm.

“Ha. He called you old,” Coin snorts.

“I’ll tie you to a chair and drop it in the Calm Belt,” Rayleigh says pleasantly.

“And I’ll think of you the whole way down,” Coin croons in his ear.

“I’ll make it a short trip then,” Rayleigh taunts, turning his head so they’re nose to nose and smirking.

“Oh. Old man yaoi,” I realize.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that,” Coin decides, pushing off Rayleigh so he can bop a fist down gently on my head. “Go say all your goodbyes, kid. This old fogey will survive a couple more minutes.”

“Alright, who’re you calling a fogey,” Rayleigh scoffs, and I move on from that with a roll of my eyes before I can get sucked further in.

I poke Luffy in the direction of his brothers, jerking my chin at them. “You say yours too,” I tell him. He nods easily enough, then trots off without complaint.

I head for the next closest person, which happens to be good ol’ Boa Hancock.

“Goodbye, Princess. Thanks for all your help,” I say, sticking my hand out like a peace offering.

Hancock stares down at it for a moment, then turns her head the other way. “Yes. Goodbye,” she repeats, chin dipping down a scant inch while her own hand twitches at her side.

I sigh with a smile, shaking my head and lowering my hand.

Hancock catches it before it drops. “Thank you,” she gets out in a rush, giving my hand one jerky shake before releasing it like a hot coal and striding away with quick steps. “Now get off my island! All these men are starting to stink it up!”

I blink after her for a second, then throw my head back and laugh.

“She sure is an interesting character,” a voice says behind me, kinder than the words are probably meant, and I turn to grin at Jimbei as he makes his way over.

“That’s certainly one way to put it,” I agree brightly.

He chuckles with shaking shoulders, then offers me up something I need to blink at a couple times before it really registers. “I figure you’ll be wanting this back before you leave.”

My yellow cowboy hat sits gently in his big hands, and it almost shocks me I barely noticed its absence.

“You had asked me to hold onto it for safekeeping at Impel Down, I figured the duty could extend until now as well,” he explains, placing the hat gingerly in my hands.

I run reverent fingers over the brim, noting how all the ash and detritus has been cleaned off it with care, and beam up at him. “Thank you very much,” I say sincerely, holding it closer to my chest.

Jimbei smiles and shakes his head. “No, it was the least I could do, Detective. *You* have my thanks for breaking me out of prison.”

“It was my pleasure, trust me,” I laugh easily.

“We’ll call it even, then,” he proposes, reaching out a hand for me to shake that I take readily.

“Even,” I agree, smile warm. His hand dwarfs mine, and this time I let go at an appropriate time instead of holding on for entirely too long.

“I wish you nothing but safe travels and meaningful progression in your skills for the future,” Jimbei states, and he really does say it like he means it. I hope I live up to any expectations he has of me.

“I’ll see you again, Jimbei,” I say firmly, meaning it with my whole chest.

Jimbei’s back straightens as he gives me a solid nod. “And so you shall, Detective Domino. I look forward to our next meeting,” he returns, solemn and warm both.

I give him my own nod back, then turn to meet Ace as he breaks off from his brothers, settling my hat on my head as Jimbei moves to go speak with Rayleigh and Coin.

“Nice hat,” Ace drawls, flicking the brim and smirking at me.

I beam back, rolling the bead of the hat string between my fingers. “Sure is,” I agree readily. “Completely kickass, if you ask me.”

Ace’s smirk broadens into a grin. “I’m glad,” he says honestly.

“Thank you for it,” I murmur, smiling down at the bead.

Ace shakes his head. “It suits you,” he offers, still honest.

“I’m glad,” I repeat, the corner of my mouth ticking up into a half-smirk.

“Seems I’ll be riding with you, so we can put off our tearful goodbye a little longer,” he teases, poking his finger into my forehead and pushing me back.

I slug him in the arm in retaliation. “Those tears are gonna be from me grinding your toe bones into a fine dust,” I grumble.

“Hey! Is that any way to treat your travel buddy?” he cries, rubbing his arm as if I’m capable of anywhere near enough force to cause him actual pain right now.

I don’t bother with a response, because the pair of pensioners come strolling up in the throes of their own dumbass conversation.

“Oh, to be missing the days of your prolific fame, where your face was plastered on every street corner and the only thing I needed to do to see you was leave the house,” Coin bemoans, draping a solemn hand across his forehead.

“Speak for yourself, nowadays I only get recognized when I’m doing dumb shit or by people too old to bother chasing me down,” Rayleigh snorts. “Suits me just fine.”

“Yeah it would, you fuckin’ hermit,” Coin says immediately and without hesitation.

“Ok, *hypocrite,”* Rayleigh jousts. “Mr. ‘I’ve Been in Hiding For a Decade With No Sightings and Only Communicating Through Letters’ has something to say?”

“I know I know, you’ve missed my gorgeous face,” he sighs dramatically. “Truly, my only crime was depriving the world of it for so long, wrinkled though I’ve become.”

“Still a sight for sore eyes,” Rayleigh chuckles, shaking his head fondly and words only half sarcastic.

“Yeah, all four of them by the looks of it,” Coin leers with a Cheshire grin.

“You people might actually be the worst,” I decide.

“Don’t say that,” Coin whines. “I know at *least* twelve people who suck more than I do.”

Rayleigh restrains himself from making a joke he *clearly* wants to make, and I can only be thankful to him for it. “It was nice seeing you, kid,” he says, smothering my hat down onto my head and then chucking me under the chin with a finger.

“Yeah yeah,” I grumble half-heartedly, swatting his hands away so I can hug him with my good arm. “Thanks for everything, Rayleigh.”

He chuckles and pats me on the back before I let go. “You take good care of that old man, you hear?”

“‘Course I will,” I scoff, mock-offended he even had to ask. “You take care of my guy, will you? He’s kind of a handful, but he’s pretty important to me.”

“I will,” Rayleigh promises.

“And *please,* I know you’re going to an island, but for the love of all that is holy make sure he fucking showers or something more than once a damn month,” I plead.

“Kid,” Coin attempts to cut in, poorly smothering his snickers.

“And you gotta make sure he doesn’t do anything *dumb,”* I add, somewhat unnecessarily. “And you gotta take care of yourself, too —”

“Kid,” Coin tries again, very clearly laughing now.

I grab onto Rayleigh’s arm. “And you gotta ask Shakky if she can water my sunflowers, they’re still just little babies and they need care, and my snails need to be fed while I’m gone

__”

Coin eventually just starts dragging me away.

_____

Luffy is the last person I say my goodbyes to.

The sun is cresting in the sky and bouncing early morning stars off his dark hair and eyes. He waits with a patience he probably doesn’t have, waiting until I step up face to face with him before taking my hand and opening his mouth.

“I’ll see you in two years time,” Luffy says, and he says it like a challenge and a plea and a promise all in one.

“Two years time,” I agree, all acceptance and determination wrapped up in a promise.

God, I’m gonna miss him something fierce.

The thought isn’t exactly novel, and it isn’t exactly helpful either. I know I’m gonna miss him, and I know it’ll probably hurt, but I just try to focus on how sweet the relief of seeing him again after those two years are up is going to be.

“See you later, Luffy,” I say simply, squeezing his hand, because it’s what I have to offer him.

I kiss him, because it feels like the right thing to do. It’s simple in the way it always is, and it doesn’t have the finality of some dramatic farewell kiss in a Hallmark movie, but it’s me and it’s Luffy and that’s all it really has to be.

“See you later, Ed,” Luffy echos, hand holding tight to mine for another moment or two before he lets me go.

I take a few steps backwards towards the shore until I’m side by side with Ace and Coin.

“You ready to go, kid?” Coin asks, his hand a sure and grounding weight on my shoulder.

I watch Luffy for a beat — not committing him to memory, but just *looking* — then nod once.

“Yeah,” I breathe out, steady despite myself. “Yeah, I am.”

So we saddle up on Pontiac: Ace a quiet but steady presence at my back, and Coin warm and solid in front of me.

“You two should grab onto something,” Coin advises, and my arm snaps around his midsection with such speed and power it actually forces an ‘oof’ sound from him. I even hook my broken arm around him, though that one doesn’t do much more than let me clench my fingers in his shirt.

“Are you gonna do that nightmarish sprint again?!” I demand shrilly.

“The *what?!”* Ace asks, having no clue what I’m talking about but panicked enough by my reaction to grab onto me regardless.

Coin just laughs. “No, we’ll go at a reasonable pace this time, promise. Give you a dramatic departure, yeah?”

I relax my grip as the tension in my body evaporates. “Oh thank *fuck.”*

“Stop unduly stressing me out,” Ace mutters, relaxing his own hold on me. “It’s probably bad for my liver, or something.”

“Eyes up, kids. Here we go,” Coin hums, and then we’re moving.

I train my watchful gaze on my brilliantly lit Captain as we pull away from the banks of Amazon Lily, his hands sweeping in big arcs above his head as he keeps vigil over our departure. We coast out farther and farther, his features becoming indistinguishable with the distance as his motions pick up speed and fervour.

“Keep your hope,” I murmur under my breath, keeping my eyes on Luffy’s figure on the shore, still frantically waving his arms goodbye.

Coin startles in front of me. “What was that?” he questions, twisting his head back to stare at me with an unreadable look.

“Keep your hope,” I repeat. “It’s what I told the boys. A parting piece of advice.”

Coin’s shoulders start trembling, ribs shaking under my arms, and for a second I’m afraid I’m gonna have a handful of crying old man to deal with before he belts out a loud laugh.

“What?” I ask, staring at him incredulously.

He shakes his head, body still shaking with a silent chuckle. “Those were Roger’s last words to me,” he admits. “Can you imagine, it’s been 22 years since I’ve heard that? In a conversation *about you,* no less.”

I blink twice. *What?*

“That’s… weirdly full circle,” I murmur, leaning my cheek on his back as the island gets smaller and smaller. I feel the distance between me and my Captain like a bone-deep ache,

and wonder if that’s how Coin feels all the time.

Then he places one of his hands over where mine are clasped around his stomach. His thumb idly spins my ring and I close my eyes, sighing and slumping into him.

Keep your hope. My own words, and yet apparently not. A sentiment that could mean a million things, stretched across time and space and present in each and every moment of it.

But right now it’s this: keep your hope, hold onto it with both hands, covet it and keep it tucked safe in your chest for when you need it most.

Yeah, I can do that. For Luffy, for my crew, for everybody I’ve come to care about? I can do that.

Keep your hope. I’ll keep mine.

Chapter End Notes

Me in the corner, practically vibrating, going 'it's like poetry. It rhymes' because I'm in Star Wars HELL and at this rate don't be surprised if I drop a fic for that bastard of a universe before we get anything more from this one T-T

I promised myself I wouldn't get fucking sappy so I'm not getting fucking sappy. I'm not crying YOU'RE CRYING SHUT UUUUUUP!!!!!! I'm not gonna say I never thought we'd make it here because be so fr my ego was never gonna let me NOT finish this goliath. Fuck I am so full of love for this fic and everyone who has read along. Eternal love to my commenters y'all the goat, to the people who've bookmarked this fic, given it kudos, subscribed, or just read it and lurked, I fucken love you guys. OK I'M DONE AHHHHHH —

And thus, we begin my (very much needed, oh boy) hiatus before the second leg of our journey. I’d like to encourage those of you who’ve subscribed to this fic to subscribe to the series as well — the next work posted is gonna be a book of oneshots that take place over the timeskip, or different perspectives of events from SSSBMTY, or even some

stuff I've got drafted up about Coin and his bullfuckery. No update schedule for that one, shit'll get posted whenever I write it with no promise for consistency or frequency, so yeah subscribing to the series is your best bet on knowing whenever that goes up. Post-Timeskip... well it will certainly happen at some point. I don't plan to wait until OP itself wraps up to write it, but depending on how rough my final year of college is it might be A Ways Out.

Until then my loves, keep your hope.

End Notes

> Feel free to bug me or just tell me your theories on my tumblr! All the art for this fic can be found on there, as well as art from y'all, and all the batshit stuff you fling at me like pebbles at a window. You can find my Kofi on there so if you wanna give me money in a distinctly NOT PROFITING DIRECTLY FROM THIS BECAUSE THAT WOULD BE ILLEGAL way, you can do that?

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